

Romanticism and Cultures of Popular Magic in the 1790s

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Summary

This thesis offers a historicist engagement with both canonical and non-canonical authors of the 1790s with the aim of revealing the investment of the period's imaginative writing in contemporary cultures of popular magic. It is a subject Romantic Studies has too long neglected. The Introduction profiles this neglect and reveals the richness of the field for historicist literary study. The first chapter proceeds to offer a profile of the dynamic contours and intersections of various modalities of popular occult practice, from cunning men and women to astrologers and conjurors, and taxonomises the available evidence. The emphasis is on both the material economies of such practices and the forms in which they gained complex literary representation. In Chapter 2, an analysis of the cultural resonance of popular magic in the formative public debates of the 1790s is followed by a case study of John Thelwall's adoption of the persona of 'conjuror' as a response to political exile and personal disillusionment. This leads, in chapters 3 and 4, to an excavation of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* that brings into view its complex and conflicted attitudes to popular magic. A radical disjunction between the two poets is identified in their differing responses to, and deployments of, material occult culture in fascinatingly transatlantic contexts. While Wordsworth came to look on the adoption of occult identities as potentially empowering for disenfranchised subjects, Coleridge anxiously regarded the superstition on which such identities relied as mentally incarcerating – a view complicated by his own guilty apostasy. Chapter 5 moves to consider Robert Southey's negotiations with *Lyrical Ballads* and his engagement with a non-domestic occult through which he articulated his own contested public identity at the close of the 1790s. One of the main aims of the thesis is to defamiliarise orthodox readings of Romantic literature by offering a new lens through which to read the period's imaginative productions against the background of sub-cultures neglected by literary critics and only recently recovered by social historians.

Introduction

The recent work of social historians provides an invaluable resource for the historicist recovery of the imbrication of Romantic literary culture and popular magic. During the past decade, interventions in the disciplines of social and cultural history have offered a portrait of the various incarnations of tradesmen (conjurors, cunning men, astrologers to name but a few) who continued to pursue their vocations throughout the Romantic period – figures who seem to have gone almost wholly unnoticed by critics of the era’s imaginative literature. With the 1790s as a chronological frame, this present study seeks a new conceptual purchase and historicist angle on the canonical and non-canonical literary productions of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Thelwall, Robert Southey and others in their orbit through the lens of the surviving material occult cultures of the period. Until recently these sub-cultures have been largely ignored even in accounts of British occult practice. My concern is with the valence of occult practice, in both rural and metropolitan spheres, as social event, material economy, cultural performance and political act. Further, I aim to show how imaginative literature negotiated these modalities of popular magic. The thesis moves beyond the critical paradigms offered by Anya Taylor in the 1970s in relation to the Coleridgean supernatural and Blakeian mythology in order to nuance our understanding of the complex ways in which Romanticism was shaped by the practices of popular magic. What is offered in this study is a fresh historicisation of the literary productions of the 1790s with reference to the work of social historians such as Owen Davies and Richard Suggett, who have uncovered the thriving *material* manifestations of the period’s cultures of popular magic. I seek to reveal the place of occult practice and culture – in the form of curses, spells, future-telling, charms and

protective talismans – in everyday life, together with the complex ways in which such practice figures, and is refigured, in literary and political discourse at a time of revolutionary upheaval.

The decision as to which authors and texts to include in this study is governed largely by their proximity to magical practice, the extent of their appropriation of local folklore, customs and characters, their location in a culture of literary conversation and allusion and, of course, the chosen time-frame. What I hope emerges is a new perspective on literature's material contexts in the 1790s – from the rhetorical, linguistic and visual jugglery of the revolution controversy and Thelwall's occult turn during a period of autobiographical self-reinvention, to Wordsworth's deployment of popular magic as a socially and politically emancipatory agent, Coleridge's anxious engagement with superstition as a despotic system of 'mental enslavement', and Southey's wrestling with an (increasingly alluring) conservatism that he associated with what he saw as Wordsworth's reliance on ultimately incarcerating systems of superstition. As already noted, these varied but crucially interlinked literary inscriptions of material occult practice were formulated by writers under intense social and political pressure.

The thesis seeks to avoid monologic readings, teasing out instead the ambiguities and paradoxes of different modalities of the occult. Indeed, any critical engagement with occult culture is implicitly paradoxical and fraught with contradictions: Romantic popular magic is both communal and solitary; a networked economy and a sequence of arcane symbols and signs; a mode of power and a mark of disempowerment; a model for political identities both radical and reactionary; and a

material phenomenon that in many ways disclaims its materiality. The challenge will be not only to recognise but also to embrace and account for these ambiguities.

Engaging the Romantic Occult

The 1970s represents the most sustained period of critical activity in this field, with Anya Taylor its most visible commentator. William Covino's 1994 *Magic, Rhetoric and Literacy*¹ cites Taylor's 1979 monograph *Magic and English Romanticism* as the only book-length study of Romantic-period literary negotiations with the occult to date.² Since then, no full-length works of note have been attempted. In her introduction to a 1977 special issue of *The Wordsworth Circle*, Taylor outlined the critical engagements with the Romantic supernatural that she had inherited.³ John Beer's *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959) and James Volant Baker's *The Sacred River* (1957)⁴ pioneered explorations of Coleridge's hermetic and kabbalistic reading. George Mills Harper's *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (1961), Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition* (1968) and Stuart Curran's 'Blake and the Gnostic Hyle: a Double Negative' (1972)⁵ – to name but a few of the critical works highlighted by Taylor – charted the contours of William Blake's gnostic and Kabbalistic research in the context of his personal mythology. The occult themes deployed by both Scott and Shelley are delineated in

¹ William Covino, *Magic, Rhetoric and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 72.

² Anya Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979).

³ Anya Taylor, 'The Occult and Romanticism', *Wordsworth Circle*, 8.2 (Spring 1977), pp. 97–103.

⁴ John Beer, *Coleridge, the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959); James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).

⁵ George Mills Harper, *The Neoplatonism of William Blake* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961); Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, Bollingen Series 35.11, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1968); Stuart Curran, 'Blake and the Gnostic Hyle: A Double Negative', *Blake Studies*, 4 (1972) pp. 117–33.

Coleman O. Parson's *Witchcraft and Daemonology in Scott's Fiction* (1964),⁶ James Reiger's *The Mutiny Within* (1967), Ross Woodman's *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (1964), and Richard Holmes's *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1975).⁷ This cadre of Romantic authors, Taylor explains, had attracted critical attention owing to the known interest each had in the occult, their explicit engagement with 'supernatural' themes, and indeed the magical experiments they actually practised in their youth. Wordsworth and Keats were believed to have 'escaped occult influence' – though Taylor does allude to Newton Stallknecht's assertion in *Strange Seas of Thought* (1958) that Wordsworth's 'philosophy of feeling often recalls the profounder and more systematically cultivated mysticism of Neoplatonic and Gnostic writers'⁸ and to the 'daemonic realm' that Keats conjured in *Endymion* and *Lamia*, as explored by Charles Patterson in *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (1970).⁹ In her own 1979 monograph, Taylor attended to what she terms the 'magical operations' of the Romantic imagination (confined, problematically, to the 'big five').¹⁰ However – and this is a crucial point – her negotiation of magic is limited to its operation largely *as metaphor*, as she considers the supernatural in terms of language, poesis and poetic theory.

The problem with critical scholarship of the 1970s is the tendency to consider the occult as largely a literary, textual experience for Romantic poets. Taylor suggests,

⁶ Coleman O Parson, *Witchcraft and Daemonology in Scott's Fiction* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964).

⁷ James Reiger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: George Braziller, 1967); Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975).

⁸ Newton P. Stallknecht, *Strange Seas of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), p.12.

⁹ Charles I. Patterson, Jr, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism*, pp. 77–8.

for instance, that Coleridge's interest in magic stemmed from his reading of other texts – in particular his interest in Shakespeare. *Macbeth* is commonly cited as the work that brings occult influence into Romantic thinking, and appears as a reference point in many critical encounters with Coleridge and the occult. Wordsworth's suspicion of magic, we are told, was somehow learned from poets such as Milton and Spencer.¹¹ Further, Taylor suggests that the second-generation Romantics were influenced by the philosophy of magic that she claims divided the opinions of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Romantic Studies in the 1970s inherited – and, crucially, largely perpetuated – a critical tradition that limited the occult to metaphor, myth and the sensationalist modalities of the supernatural, thus relegating the operations of the Romantic occult to a narrow field of select writers. The survival of the occult as a living social phenomenon during the Romantic period remains insufficiently recognised. Seeking to contextualise the occult in the literature of the Romantic period, critical negotiations have often, problematically, resorted to ancient myth, pre-Enlightenment occult texts, and literary productions from other periods.

At the heart of 1970s critical engagements with the occult is a fundamental (and frustrating) instability. For the purposes of this study, spiritual and philosophical notions of the occult need to be teased apart from the material, social applications practised by cunning folk so that the myriad contemporary operations of a material occult can be identified against a diffuse and sensationalised Gothic. The only reference to Coleridge's actual experience of 'occult' practice in Taylor's *Magic and English Romanticism* is to the healing charm to which he would turn in his youth when

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 182–3.

he had leg cramps.¹² Aside from this biographical detail, Taylor's only other reference to practical magic reduces its existence to the activity of the superstitious cultures and communities of a bygone era:

For Coleridge nature exists, but it depends for its vitality on the sensitive magician, in the same way that the crops and hunts in a primitive community are believed to depend on the magician's ritual spells.¹³

Thus, history is missing from 1970s critical encounters with the Romantic occult. As a result, Taylor's monograph initiated a decade of research that now shows its age. Her research, of course, pre-dated the various deconstructions of Romantic texts accomplished by feminist theory, New Historicism and 'four nations' or devolutionary Romanticism. And yet, to date, the challenge of historicising popular magic has not been robustly taken up.

A promising conceptual start was not extended and deepened by the New Historicist hegemony, which over a period of thirty years and more has encouraged scholars radically to embed the 'literary' in various cultural networks, deploy feminist paradigms, and recalibrate the 'canonical' so as to achieve a more holistic understanding of the circulation of cultural signs and discourses during the period. While the occult appears to present an exciting and, in many ways, ideal subject for Romantic New Historicism to tackle (the initial apparent paradox of a 'material occult'

¹² Ibid., p. 73.

¹³ Ibid., p. 80.

notwithstanding), it is a field (an economy, a practice, a discourse) that has been unaccountably neglected.

Negotiations of the occult in the years since the rise of New Historicism as a critical orthodoxy have tended to practice demystificatory moves. 'Secularised' readings of Romanticism have sought to 'explain away' the magical. For example, Lucy Newlyn has suggested that the careful layering of unreliable narration deployed in 'The Thorn' is designed to educate readers out of their (literary) fascination with outmoded superstition in order to become more reflective and responsible both as reading subjects and as social subjects. While Newlyn valuably alerts us to the significant role of sensationalist gossip as a barrier to social reform, her reading does not take full account, I suggest, of the social and cultural contexts from which works such as *Lyrical Ballads* emerged in an era that still relied on, and maintained belief in, the local cunning man's powers. A complete evacuation of the occult in *Lyrical Ballads* problematically strips subjugated individuals (Martha Ray, Goody Blake) of all power. As I will show, a critical reading alive to the possibilities that contemporary popular magic offered the lower classes reveals Wordsworth's hopes for social reform through the empowerment of disenfranchised individuals.

It is now axiomatic that New Historicism attends to text-as-history and to history-as-text. By its very nature, magic is also accessible only through textual and material evidence – through records such as diaries, letters, sales figures of almanacs, legal documents, written charms and, of course, works of imaginative literature. Since the 1980s, New Historicism has succeeded in recalibrating our sense of the complexities and ironies of a Romantic utterance. Romantic poetry is no longer an escape into nature, or into the self. The kind of deconstructionist historicism applied

to Romantic texts has revealed the ways in which the Romantic lyric (in particular) performed itself as an elaborate, always already politicised, allegory of absence. The turn to nature (or the self, or the transcendent) becomes a mark of the socio-political pressures conditioning the contours of the text. Recent years have seen historicist methodologies of different kinds reveal the contiguities between the imaginative literature of the period and scientific discovery. Studies such as Richard Holmes's *The Age of Wonder* (2009)¹⁴ and Sharon Ruston's *Shelley and Vitality* (2005)¹⁵ have prompted a critical reassessment of the Romantics as technophobes – too absorbed with the (egotistical) sublime and a euphemised view of the natural order to countenance the nuances and consequences of scientific and technological development. New Historicism has begun to achieve for Romantic science what it achieved for politics during the 1980s, dramatically changing the landscape of Romantic Studies.

However, while scholars have considered themselves to be on safe ground when co-opting the disciplines of politics or science, the occult presents a qualitatively different area of enquiry, one whose interface with 'science', historically conceived, deserves scrutiny. It is difficult to draw a definitive line between what can be identified as 'science' and what as 'magic'; often the two are inescapably linked, and in many cases, a scientific discovery remains 'occult' or 'other' until it can be thoroughly explained and naturalised. This is why it is important to evaluate the cultural location of the occult within this entangled relationship. In her introduction to *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989),

¹⁴ Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and Vitality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

in which the occult is presented as a living and integral part of Victorian spiritual and intellectual life and society, Alex Owen highlights the difficulties confronting the literary scholar who also hopes to play the role of historian – especially when delving into the realms of the ‘spiritual’:

As the subject of historical analysis, spiritualism presents the historian with all kinds of problems about the empirical status of evidence; and in order to explore more fully the issues it raises it is necessary to invoke less familiar, and perhaps unprovable, concepts and arguments.¹⁶

There is perhaps here a residual unease regarding the critical propriety of dealing with ‘unprovable’ aspects of the occult. And yet, as Owen emphasises, there is no such thing as ‘innocent history’ and, as all history can only be encountered textually, she suggests that an exploration of magic is as intellectually stringent as any other scholarly endeavour.

Critical Limits

If (as is often claimed) history had been too long absent from studies of Romanticism until the early 1980s, Romanticism has also been missing from the history of magic.

Major historical works such as George Kittredge’s *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1929), Cecil Ewen’s *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (1933), Alan Macfarlane’s

¹⁶Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. xx. See also Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England (1970) and Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971)¹⁷ are foregrounded by social historian Owen Davies as crucial texts in the study of magic in England.¹⁸ However, these authors' negotiation of magic is largely bound up with a culture of witchcraft, and as a result their studies end, as Davies notes, 'prematurely with the termination of the witch trials in the early 1700s'.¹⁹ The historical study of the occult (as distinct from a vaguely defined 'supernatural') has traditionally bypassed the Romantic period and focused on Victorian incarnations such as spiritualism. Curiously, critical engagements with the Romantic Gothic often seem to be delivered from within a version of the Romantic Ideology: although it has been psychoanalysed and historicised, the tendency has been to regard the Gothic as a mode of political allegory, or psychosexual displacement, rather than a genre that may bespeak a measure of contact with, or immersion in, a living culture of the occult (which is itself deeply involved in psychosexual, political and social processes and pathologies, as I hope to show). It is clear that, until recently, social history failed to engage satisfactorily with the continuum along which Early Modern witchcraft and the Victorian paranormal exist.

The material occult cultures of the Romantic period seemed lost, until, in 1999, Owen Davies published *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736–1951*.²⁰ This engaging study reveals the survival of a service-driven practice of traditional folk-magic

¹⁷ George Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); Cecil Ewen, *Witchcraft and Demonianism* (London: Heath Cranton Ltd, 1933); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1970); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971).

¹⁸ Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning Folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003), p. xiii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁰ Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

following the abolition of the Witchcraft Act in 1736, and the various manifestations of occult practice that survived throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (indeed, into the twentieth). By using a diverse range of primary materials, Davies's book highlights the role of magic as living practice and trade in the period. Refreshingly, the study does not labour under any post-Enlightenment critical embarrassment, nor does it inhabit only the shadowy memory of myth or Early Modern literature. What is of particular significance as regards my own engagement with the Romantic occult is Davies's analysis of the occult practitioner. As profiled in my first Chapter, one of Davies's major contributions is the portrait he draws of the various social roles of cunning folk, astrologers, fortune tellers and gypsies. His work carefully disaggregates and desynonymises their practices, spheres of operation and social identities.

Following *Witchcraft Magic and Culture*, Davies published *Popular Magic: Cunning folk in English History* (2003), which builds on the previous intervention by identifying the roles of cunning men as healers, detectives and tradesmen from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Chapters cover the law, social identities, the services provided by occult practitioners, their books and written charms, and the differences between British cunning folk and their European counterparts. *Popular Magic* also offers valuable archipelagic coverage in ranging across 'regional' sub-cultures. This aspect of Davies's research is extended by Richard Suggett in *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (2008), and by Davies again in *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (1999). Cunning folk operated, for the most part, as anti-witchcraft agents, and Davies is again keen to nuance and historicise distinctions between different professions, beliefs and roles. His

taxonomies are of significant value to a historicist literary criticism that has not hitherto been able to break with unsatisfactorily overdetermined umbrella terms ('occult', 'magic', 'witch'), as evidenced in the work of Anya Taylor.

Yet this valuable intervention in social history has its weaknesses. In *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, Davies offers a chapter entitled 'witchcraft, magic and popular literature', and sections in *Popular Magic* draw on the evidence of 'books' and 'written charms', venturing into the textual territories of occult practice. He has also devoted an entire monograph – *Grimoires* (2009)²¹ – to the study of magic books. Here, however, the 'literary' remains little more than incidental evidence – a means by which history can be excavated. Throughout his studies, Davies alludes to the work of several poets to illustrate the pressure of the occult on the literary consciousness of the early eighteenth century:

The fact that literary society of the early eighteenth century engaged with the subject of cunning folk is surely a testament to the extent to which these magical practitioners continued to impinge upon the educated consciousness.²²

However, he, too, falls into the trap of condemning magic to the literature of a previous era, referring to Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* when negotiating literary appropriations of the occult. When Davies gestures at the significance of imaginative literature as evidence of the survival

²¹ Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 42.

of folk traditions, he refers only to early-eighteenth and late-nineteenth-century writers. The Romantic period once again remains unaccountably neglected, an implied parenthesis, despite the fact that the magical practitioner – whether rural or metropolitan, magus or cunning man/woman, solitary or sociable, inscriber of charms or astrological caster of nativities, local ‘secret’ or national treasure, commodified professional or amateur – suggests fascinating points of contact with the various identities of the Romantic-period author and the marketplace. The (apparent) contradictions that lie at the heart of the folk traditions unveiled by Davies also characterise a Romanticism that is solitary and sociable, rational and intuitive, secular and spiritual, transactional and unworldly.

Davies’s introduction to *Popular Magic* articulates dissatisfaction with previous historical engagements with the occult, arguing that they have been too focused on witchcraft as a cultural form, and suggesting that cunning folk have been ‘air-brushed out of representations of the past’.²³ These elisions are also reflected in historicist literary criticism. The achievements of social and cultural history in uncovering a surviving culture of cunning folk prompt re-readings of the period’s polemical, as well as imaginative, literature. The ‘matter’ of the occult in political discourse likewise reveals a proximity to a living culture as well as (clearly) a ‘literary’ inheritance. The value of the work of historians such as Davies and Suggett lies in their relocation of the occult – no longer positioned firmly within the realm of the supernatural, but instead grounded in a complex relationship with the natural and social order. In the form of the cunning man or woman who provided the community with a service (healing,

²³ Ibid., p. xiv.

locating missing belongings, producing charms and regulating behaviour, as outlined in Chapter 1) the 'occult' becomes an emphatically *social* phenomenon. What these discoveries offer students of Romanticism is evidence of the social reach and impact of occult practice and an evaluative purchase on material evidence that does away with critical misgivings regarding 'magical' subject matter. Manifestations of quotidian, localised forms of popular magic provide a new lens through which to view Romanticism. Doing so involves throwing into relief the ways in which historicist analyses of Romantic culture have fetishised the socio-political as their 'proper' sphere of operation to the exclusion of other cultural forms.

Of course, this is not to say that Romantic Studies has completely neglected incarnations of occult practice and belief in the period. Contemporary cultures of astrology – which also played an important role in the repertoire of many folk-practitioners – have recently been valuably highlighted by Paul Cheshire and Marsha Keith Schuchard, who have brought into focus the hitherto overlooked, radically illuminist theo-hermeticism of astrologer and talisman-maker William Gilbert (1760–1825?).²⁴ In 2009, Damian Walford Davies explored De Quincey's broad interest in the traffic between the literary imagination and the occult by identifying a particularly resonant instance of the survival of a material culture of the occult located in north-east Wales (but extending far beyond).²⁵ The work of Tim Fulford has been seminal in identifying the impact on the Romantic imagination of occult rituals practised in the

²⁴ See Paul Cheshire, 'The Hermetic Geography of William Gilbert', *Romanticism*, 9.1 (2003), pp. 82–93, and Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Rediscovering William 'Hurricane' Gilbert: A Lost Voice of Revolution and Madness in the Worlds of Blake and the Romantics* (2005), <http://www.williamgilbert.com/GILBERT_Schuchard.htm> [accessed 29 April 2012].

²⁵ Damian Walford Davies, 'Pig in a Dingle: De Quincey and the Romantic Culture of the Occult', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5580 (March 2010), pp. 13–15.

colonies by tribes such as the Oby in the West Indies and the Copper Mine Indians (a particular interest for Coleridge on reading Bryan Edwards' and Samuel Hearne's colonial narratives).²⁶ The curses of Obeah-men mentally enslaved their victims, Fulford argues, since 'in proportion to their own powerlessness, subjugated peoples granted others powers that *seemed* supernatural'.²⁷ The subjects of Britain and France, unthinkingly submitting to oppressive leaders with 'slavish obedience', were victims of the same self-perpetuating systems of tyrannical superstition as the victims of Obeah curse, collapsing the assumed superiority of the West. Fulford's negotiation of superstition as ensnaring tyranny provides a valuable foundation for my own exploration in this thesis of the same systems of guilt and oppression that ensured the efficacy of the magic practised by cunning folk in towns and villages closer to home.

Adjacent Cultures: The Parameters of this Study

While the instantiation of popular magic provides the central focus for this thesis, it was only one of the many incarnations of contemporary occult practice that jostled for legitimacy and prominence (and frequently achieved hybrid forms) within shared social and intellectual spheres. The 1790s occult denotes a wildly varied array of practices and beliefs: folk magic, astrology, prophecy, esotericism, Mesmerism, the visionary, the legerdemain of mountebanks and stage illusion – each modality with its

²⁶ See Tim Fulford, 'Slavery and Superstition in the Supernatural Poems', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 45-58, and *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁷ Fulford, 'Slavery and Superstition', p. 46.

own history, economy and consumer base. Writing in 1857, Thomas Carlyle looked back on the late-eighteenth century as

The very age of imposters, cut-purses, swindlers, double-goers, enthusiasts, ambiguous persons; quacks simple, quacks compound; crack-brained or with deceit prepense; quacks and quackeries of all colours and kinds. How many Mesmerists, magicians, Cabalists, Swedenborgians, Illuminati, Crucified Nuns, and Devils of Loudun! To which [Cagliostro's] Inquisition Biographer adds vampires, sylphs, Rosicrucians, Free-masons and an *Etcetera*.²⁸

As Paul Kléber Monod reveals in *Solomon's Secret Arts* (2013), during the late eighteenth century modalities of occult practice underwent what might best be described as a recombination: 'the established practices of alchemy, astrology and rural magic, which had been declining among educated people for some time were reconfigured – pulled apart, jumbled together and combined with different elements'.²⁹ These practices were in crucial ways co-dependent, their borders blurred and permeable. Imposing a rigid taxonomy risks undermining the nuances of these delicately interwoven cultures. However, it is necessary to delimit clearly the terms and boundaries of the present study: namely those relating to the *material*, *transactional* practices of popular magic, and the question of how they achieved

²⁸ Thomas Carlyle 'Miscellanies II', *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle in 16 Volumes* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1857), v. IV, p. 259.

²⁹ Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 13.

literary expression during the period. There were, of course, points of friction and contact where popular magic interacted with aspects of other contemporary occult practice. Taking stock of co-existing occult cultures and practices and seeking to determine their impact on popular (and literary) perceptions of folk magic are a necessary part of gauging the wider context and influence of 'the occult' in the 1790s – although the scope of my study requires that they remain largely of tangential concern. The following profile of what I term adjacent cultures seeks to locate cultures of popular magic within the larger context of traditions that were perceived as 'occult' but which differ in important ways from my field of enquiry and chosen focus.

As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1, the most challenging aspect of any historicist investigation of popular magic in the 1790s is the *lack* of extant written evidence by cunning folk or their clients – individuals who had first-hand experience of the continued reliance on cultures of popular magic. Thus, access to the 'realities' of the cunning trade is obscured by layers of third-party narrative (mis)perception. While some occult traditions whose practitioners were actively engaged in publishing have fared better in this regard (some prophets and astrologers, for instance), the problem of accessing history through texts remains in profiling the wider cultural landscape of the occult during the Romantic period. Any attempt to define clearly what exactly constituted 'the occult' in the 1790s is rendered complex by the fluidity of its forms, and the frequent conflation and confusion of its key terms.

Across Europe – particularly among Britain's 'higher grade' Masonic lodges – 'hidden knowledge' was pursued as the study of arcane occult philosophy. Men such as Gustavus Katterfelto, Giovanni Guiseppe Pinetti, Phillip Breslaw, James Graham and

Giuseppe Balsamo (also known as Count Alessandro Cagliostro) – celebrities of the late eighteenth century – performed feats of illusion that some believed to be supernatural.³⁰ Frequently deploying a discourse that denoted the proximity of their practices to rational and enlightened science, these societies and individuals had enjoyed a period of respectability during the 1780s, owing largely to the ‘diffuse, unfocused and broadly tolerant nature of the English enlightenment’.³¹ However, this acceptance had begun to wane as the century drew to a close – a shift, Monod argues, that did not signify the disappearance of occult thinking, but rather indicated a change in cultural climate in the wake of the French Revolution.³² After the war with France began in 1793, any culture that ran counter to orthodox systems of belief would be regarded with suspicion. Certain societies sought to distance themselves from accusations that they encouraged revolutionary or radical thought;³³ French Jesuit (and former freemason) Abbé Augustin Barruel’s three-volume *Memoires Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (published in France in 1797–8 and almost immediately translated into English), however, sought to ‘expose’ the engineering of the French Revolution by secret societies on the continent, masterminded by the Illuminist infiltrations of elite freemasonry:

³⁰ See David Paton-Williams, *Katterfelto: Prince of Puff* (Leicester: Matador, 2008); Lydia Syson, *Doctor of Love: James Graham and his Celestial Bed* (Surrey: Alma Books, 2008); Iain McCalman, *The Seven Ordeals of Count Cagliostro* (London: Arrow Books, 2004).

³¹ Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts*, p. 295.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³³ The Freemasons claimed to be loyalist and, while Baron Swedenborg may have inspired radically-minded individuals, his own visions were of a spiritual rather than political import. See Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts*, pp. 321–6.

All classes . . . every code of [occult] Masonry, Hermetic, Cabalistic or Martinists, and Eclectic [the Bavarian Illuminati], all and each forwarded the Revolution; and it little imported to the sect which struck the blow, provided ruin ensued.³⁴

These accusations were vehemently supported by fellow ex-mason Edmund Burke. Scottish scientist John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe Carried on in the Secret Meetings of the Freemasons, Illuminati and Reading Societies, collected from Good Authorities* (1797) argued that 'pure' British strains of freemasonry had been perverted by the Jacobin influences of Illuminist lodges operating across the Channel, whose intention was to undermine orthodox religious systems: 'nothing is more clear,' Robison claimed, 'than that the design of the Illuminati was to abolish Christianity'.³⁵

The entanglement of societies, sects and fraternities in these alarmist attacks – Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Mesmerists, Swedenborgians, Avignon Prophets, to name but a few of those accused of participating in this radical intellectual climate of occult subversion – indicates the fervid confusion of the period. The Illuminati, for instance – a small fraternity of eighteenth-century Bavarian rationalist egalitarians – were frequently (and, in some cases, intentionally, according to Robison) confused with the mystical Rosicrucians, or with the seventeenth-century Illuminés from the south of

³⁴ Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trans. Robert Clifford (London: T. Burton, 1798), vol. II, p. 48.

³⁵ John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (London: T. Cadell, 1798), p. 269.

France – although they ‘actually represented a rationalist reaction *against* occult masonry . . . [rejecting] the Templar myth, Swedenborgianism and the whole system of occult higher degrees’.³⁶ Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) named popular Enthusiasts as the descendants of the seventeenth-century Fifth Monarchists, linking Enthusiastic thought to the perceived religious superstition of the Commonwealth. Burke’s attack led to the popular use of ‘Enthusiasm’ as a pejorative term for radical ideology during the 1790s.³⁷ Mesmerism also came under attack for its ‘occult’ influences (despite the majority of Mesmerists defining their craft as a ‘science’) and became an important material context for debates catalysed by the Revolution in France. Mesmerists were typically of a lower class than their clients, leading to concerns that the practice denoted a disruption of the traditional status quo.³⁸ Reactionaries associated Mesmerism’s levelling powers with the socially disruptive French Republicans, while radicals accused Pitt’s government of manipulating the emotions and superstitions of the populace with their ‘invisible powers’ (as the Mesmerist would ensnare his patient) to ensure hegemonic control.³⁹ As Mike Jay contends in *The Air Loom Gang* (2003), ‘Mesmerism was an invisible current deeply woven into the fabric of the Revolution’.⁴⁰ This manifested itself dramatically with the arrest of James Tilly Matthews in 1796 after he loudly declared Lord Liverpool a traitor from the gallery of the House of Commons, claiming that Liverpool, Pitt and even Charles James Fox – leader of the Whig opposition – were

³⁶ Kleber Monod, p. 321.

³⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009).

³⁸ See, for instance, Winter, *Mesmerized*, p. 119.

³⁹ See Kléber Monod, *Solomon’s Secret Arts*, pp. 305-13 and Mike Jay, *The Air Loom Gang: The Strange and True Story of James Tilly Matthews and his Visionary Madness* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), pp. 146-53.

⁴⁰ Jay, *The Air Loom Gang*, p. 146.

speaking under the magnetic influences of the 'air loom' – a machine secreted in a London basement, controlled by a fanatical band of Paris Jacobins.

Occult cultures that focused on philosophical, rather than material, pursuits do not fall within the scope of this thesis. Nor do those – such as Mesmerism and stage illusion – that typically branded themselves as being in the service of specifically 'scientific' or rational thought, or served as entertainment, rather than as commercial economic practice. However, crucially in the context of this study, these adjacent occult cultures were frequently perceived to be aligned with the paradigms and practices of popular magic. Some occult practitioners were shrewd publicists and embraced public perceptions of their practices as supernatural. For instance, the Italian-born conjuror Cagliostro – who (it was said) could peer into the future – professed a knowledge of alchemy and was popularly believed to be hundreds of years old.⁴¹ The stage illusionist Katterfelto (1743–1799) began to tour with a black cat – a traditional talisman of witchcraft – in order to fuel rumour and gossip as he toured smaller provincial towns, in an effort to appeal to a demographic who still believed in the supernatural in the form of the local cunning man.⁴² Others' capital, however, was based on demystification. Publications such as Phillip Breslaw's *Breslaw's Last Legacy* (1784), sought to 'wipe away many ill-grounded notions which ignorant people have imbibed' and expose those 'self-interested and designing persons' who 'pretended to

⁴¹ See McCalman, *The Seven Ordeals of Count Cagliostro*.

⁴² See Paton-Williams, *Katterfelto: Prince of Puff*, pp. 175–89 for a detailed itinerary of Katterfelto's provincial tours. A minister in Grantham had linked Katterfelto's arrival in Lincolnshire with a falling meteor, and *The Chester Chronicle* of January 1791 reported the views of those who believed that he was guilty of conjuring inclement weather: 'such is the potency of the *great* Dr. Katterfelto's *magic* that many continue to charge him with having raised the late winds'. *The Cumberland Pacquet* of 1790 stated that 'many of the lower class of people, who have seen his exhibition, will have it that he is the DEVIL'. See Paton-Williams, *Katterfelto: Prince of Puff*, p. 85.

enchantment' and who claimed they could 'hold intelligence with supernatural beings'.⁴³ As suspicion of pursuits that were perceived to be unconventional, arcane and secretive began to gather force in the 1790s, attacks levelled against 'dangerous' societies and individuals frequently sought to align their practices with the occult and with superstition. For instance, Barruel's attack on The Irish Brotherhood quoted extensively from the Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons in Ireland to disparage their superstitious ritual:

Its ceremonial is also masonic, in order to create enthusiasm. 'Let every member wear (day and night) an amulet round his neck, containing the great principle which unites the brotherhood, in letters of gold, on a ribbon, striped with all the original colours, and inclosed in a sheath of white silk . . . Let this amulet of union, faith and honour pendant from the neck, and be bound about the body next to the skin, and close to the heart'.⁴⁴

The 'great principle' of the society is likened to a written charm – a fetishised token or talisman of radical ideals designed (so Barruel feared) to instil fanaticism in the wearer. Fuelled by this sensationalist reactionary fearmongering, public opinion frequently confused radical politics with occult philosophy and 'diabolical' magic, and

⁴³ *Breslaw's Last Legacy or the Conjuror Unmasked* (J. Barker: London, 1794) p. iii. As a magician, Breslaw may have dismissed popular magic, but his *Last Legacy* contains advice on fortune-telling. His claim that the divinations he describes are 'innocent' and 'much better than for a young woman to tell her secrets to a fortune-teller, who can inform her no better, if she pays a shilling for the intelligence' suggests that he was sceptical of practitioners, rather than of future-telling itself. See p. 104.

⁴⁴ *Report from the Committee of Secrecy, of the House of Commons in Ireland, as Reported Aug. 21, 1798*, quoted in Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, vol. IV, p. 604.

the language that denoted magical *practice* was thereby also politicised, as I seek to show in Chapter 2. The saturation of esoteric theory in the polemical writing of the period (and vice versa) is undeniable. The material occult practices I excavate in the present study clearly do not exist in a sphere wholly removed from these adjacent cultures. Indeed, discursive adjacencies are precisely what makes the material occult so relevant to political debate and discourses of protest in the period. At the same time, my thesis will be careful to identify the distinctiveness of popular magic and its literary inscriptions as against the beliefs and practices noted above.

While the material, social operations of popular magic practised by cunning folk have been overlooked by Romantic Studies, other modalities of the occult have been better served by historicist critical interventions. The promise of ‘revealed truths’ attendant on the ‘remarkable revival of occult thinking’ in the 1780s had attracted freethinkers who sought a means of spiritual enlightenment and moral reform in the esoteric and hermetic systems professed by the ancients, filtered down through the likes of Pythagoras, Paracelsus, Jakob Boehme and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa.⁴⁵ Radical creative minds were fuelled by this ‘territory of boundless imaginative liberty’.⁴⁶ Nigel Leask’s *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge’s Critical Thought* (1988) and Tim Fulford’s *Coleridge’s Figurative Language* (1991) investigate the influences of traditions of esoteric knowledge on Coleridge, who found confirmation of his own Neoplatonist theories when reading Plotinus and Boehme in the development of a poetic theory that attempted to sculpt a ‘language of holy

⁴⁵ Kleber Monod, p. 295.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

community'.⁴⁷ Sheila Spector has similarly located the roots of Blake's radical apocalyptic mythology in his early engagement with Swedenborgianism and Kabbalistic writing.⁴⁸ Blake's early work regarded 'occult tradition' as enslaved to reason. Occult philosophy's attempts to 'explain' nature by tying it systematically to the material world and to sensory experience were constricting, and Blake's mythopoeic version of Christian history sought to escape the confinement of imaginative liberty by these systems. Jennifer Wunder's *Keats, Hermeticism and the Secret Societies* (2008) offers a Keatsian perspective on culturally contextualised 'hidden knowledge' for the second generation Romantic poets.⁴⁹ Following the recovery of a letter from John Spurgin to Keats, passionately detailing Swedenborgian theories, Wunder's study attempts to highlight the speculations and philosophies that Keats would refine and refashion during his poetic career.⁵⁰

As early as 1910, Romantic Studies had drawn a link between the figure of Coleridge's ancient mariner and Romantic-period pseudo-scientific cultures of Mesmerism. Lane Cooper's essay 'The Power of the Eye in Coleridge' linked the invisible force that the wedding guest felt emanating from the eye of the mariner with animal magnetism.⁵¹ More recently, Charles J. Rzepka has identified the blessing of the sea snakes, and the mariner's subsequent ability to pray, as a moment of

⁴⁷ Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. xvi.

⁴⁸ See Sheila Spector, *Wonders Divine: The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth* (London: Associated University Press, 2001) and *Romanticism/Judaica: A Convergence of Cultures* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).

⁴⁹ Jennifer Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism and the Secret Societies* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

⁵⁰ John Spurgin, 'Letter to John Keats, 5 December 1815, Edward B. Hinkley, On First Looking into Swedenborg's Philosophy: A New Keats-Circle Letter', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 9.1 (Winter 1960), pp. 15–25.

⁵¹ Lane Cooper, *The Power of the Eye in Coleridge* (1910), <<http://archive.org/stream/cu31924073804175#page/n7/mode/2up>> [accessed 9 October 2012].

Mesmeric 'release'.⁵² In his 2004 essay 'Conducting the Vital Fluid: The Politics and Poetics of Mesmerism in the 1790s', Tim Fulford argues that Coleridge's mariner 'owes his being to what Coleridge had read about shamans and their European cousins – Mesmerists'.⁵³ As I will show, the same issues of power, control and submission are as pertinent to bewitching and cursing as they are to magnetism. Roger Cooter argues that Mesmerism 'is nakedly about power and control, or submissions of will'.⁵⁴

However, while Mesmerism may have had aspects in common with popular magic in this regard, Fulford is careful to emphasise that the magnetist's are '*seemingly* magic powers'. The Mesmerist is '*like* a wizard', and Coleridge viewed Mesmerism '*like* the conjuror's arts'.⁵⁵ The forging (in all senses) of the antiquarian fashion and political ideology of neo-Druidism has enjoyed particular critical attention in recent years from scholars interested in both long cultural/historical perspectives and the ways in which history was imaginatively reconstructed for political ends in the 1790s in the form of an idiosyncratic Bardic radicalism.⁵⁶ Following the founding of The Ancient Order of Druids in 1781, Edward Williams (1747–1826), or, to use his adopted bardic name, Iolo Morganwg, turned the figure of the druid-bard to political account in the 1790s, announcing himself as 'The Bard of Liberty' and proudly proclaiming his ancestry as one of the only remaining Glamorgan bards. The body of criticism dealing with the

⁵² Charles J. Rzepka, 'Recollecting Spontaneous Overflows: Romantic Passions, the Sublime and Mesmerism', *Romantic Passions* (April 1998), <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/passions/rzepka/rzp.html>> [accessed 9 October 2012] (para. 49 of 49).

⁵³ Fulford, 'Conducting the Vital Fluid', p. 74.

⁵⁴ Roger Cooter, 'The History of Mesmerism in Britain: Poverty and Promise', *Franz Anton Mesmer und die Geschichte des Mesmerismus*, ed. Heinz Z. Schott (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985), pp.152-62, p. 152.

⁵⁵ Fulford, 'Conducting the Vital Fluid', - italics mine.

⁵⁶ A. L. Owen, *The Famous Druids: A Survey of Three Centuries of English Literature on the Druids* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), Ward Rutherford, *The Druids and their Heritage* (London : Gordon and Cremonesi, 1978), Ronald Hutton, *The Druids*, (Hambledon Continuum, 2007) and *Blood and Mistletoe: A History of the Druids in Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2009).

complexities of Iolo's highly politicised contribution to the Romantic bardic revival has been recently enhanced by Geraint Jenkins and Mary-Ann Constantine as part of the *Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales, 1740-1918* project. A creative – to the point of forgery – codifier of the 'matter' on which a nascent bardic-Welsh nationalism might feed, Williams believed that connections with the original bards (and, in turn, the druids, whom he considered to be practitioners of 'the only authentic version of patriarchal religion'⁵⁷) would serve to underpin a Welsh cultural renaissance. The profile of Bardism he included in the introduction to William Owen Pughe's *The Heroic Elegies of Llywarch Hen* (1793) – much of it of immediate political resonance – aligned the Welsh with their egalitarian druid ancestors.⁵⁸ Iolo's 'druidical' Gorsedd, particularly after its formal grafting onto the rituals of the eisteddfod in 1819, may have helped to bring neo-druidism into the public eye and public consciousness, but the 'bardic revival' as it existed in the 1790s operated predominantly in an intellectual and literary sphere, rather than as an embedded, internalised system of contemporary *practice* relevant to the day-to-day lives of the wider populace. The modalities of popular magic on which I focus are material rather than philosophical, commercial economies rather than highbrow esoteric or academic pursuits, and existed as practical solutions to everyday problems in community contexts rather than as secretive, individualist enterprises or cultural-nationalist

⁵⁷ Jon Mee, "'Images of the Truth New Born': Iolo, William Blake and the Literary Radicalism of the 1790s", *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 173–193, p. 192.

⁵⁸ See *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2009). See *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), Mary-Ann Constantine, *The Truth against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007) and the other titles published as part of the project as listed on the research centre's website: <<http://www.iolomorganwg.wales.ac.uk>> (2001–8), [accessed 17 August 2015].

movements driven by creative cultural clerisies. For these reasons, though they afford relevant parallel paradigms, the modalities of the 'occult' profiled above fall outside the scope of this thesis.

Adjacent Cultures: The Proximity of Popular Prophecy

One adjacent occult culture I do propose to explore in conjunction with practices of popular magic and their inscriptions in imaginative literature is that of prophecy. I do so with particular reference to Coleridge's movement from a discourse of Enthusiastic prophecy to one of anxious recantation during the course of the 1790s. Employed by both revolutionary and reactionary ideologues in the 1790s, prophetic and millenarian discourses – some of which were accepted as part of religious orthodoxy while other, more radical, strains were considered occult and destabilisingly cultish – have recently prompted much valuable critical investigation. Morton D. Paley's seminal work on the layered prophetic discourses that attracted both Blake and Coleridge paved the way for an unveiling of the significance of radical millenarian prophecy by Tim Fulford, Jon Mee, Iain McCalman and others.⁵⁹

Discourses of divination in 1790s Britain were an index of the political turmoil that characterised the decade. Social, political and economic uncertainty fuelled the survival in evolving forms of the future-telling trade; foreknowledge brought comfort

⁵⁹ See Morton D. Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (London: Yale University Press, 1986), and *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1999); *Romanticism and Millenarianism* ed. Tim Fulford (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988) and the festschrift dedicated to Iain Macalman's work; *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform*, ed. Michael T. Davies and Paul A. Pickering (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008)

to many, and those who professed such abilities inherited a grave responsibility. Scriptural prophecy had always featured as an accepted part of orthodox religion.⁶⁰ Similarly, a predicted apocalypse – differently conceived in terms of a gradual moral and spiritual reform or as varieties of a Second Coming – was part of conventional religious thought. The atheist John Thelwall worked tirelessly to distance Jacobinism from religious fanaticism, while dissenters such as Joseph Priestley and Coleridge (with difficulty) worked to establish a rational Unitarian paradigm that still allowed the French Revolution to be read as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy while strictly defining the roles of imagination and prophecy as separate (if sometimes co-operative) entities. However, laying claim to a direct communication with the divine as transformative historical agent through visionary experience was, by the close of the eighteenth century, firmly located in the realms of Enthusiasm and the occult, and prophesying an immediate and *physical* apocalypse was regarded as a dangerous brand of millenarianism. Many radicals were hostile to this form of Enthusiasm, which they regarded as ‘contrary to the spirit of Enlightenment that they believed was being fulfilled in the French Revolution’, and were anxious to dissociate themselves from charges of fanaticism.⁶¹ Again, we glimpse here anxieties relating to accusations that one’s political ideology denoted a belief in the supernatural and, by extension, outmoded reliance on superstition.

⁶⁰ See J. F. C Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 3-4.

⁶¹ Jon Mee, ‘Anxieties of Enthusiasm: Coleridge, Prophecy and Popular Politics in the 1790s’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60 (1997), pp. 179–203, p. 184. For a more detailed explanation of Enthusiasm and its political role during the 1790s, see Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, and *Dangerous Enthusiasm*.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in the points of intersection between popular magic and visionary modes of prophecy. Like the adjacent cultures profiled above, discourses of prophecy were bound up in a language that denoted its proximity to popular magic. *Ecce Homo*, (1819) an attack on Lincolnshire-based astrologer and cunning man John Parkins, illustrates this contiguity. The anonymous authors attacks Parkins's adoption and manipulation of Thessalonians 5:20, 'despise not prophesying', in his *Cabinet of Wealth* (1812):

What the apostle means by *Despise not Prophesying*, is simply in reference to Preaching or Expounding the Scriptures; and not the Abstruse and Sophisticated Construction Doctor Parkins puts upon the words. – Preaching the Gospel is the Ordinary Channel through which it has pleased God to communicate Divine Instruction to the Mind of Man . . . But Doctor Parkins is labouring to 'darken counsel by words without knowledge' and to make it appear that the Almighty has sent him on an Extraordinary Embassy, to communicate to mankind in these lower regions, from Starry Aspects and Angelic Agency, something essential to be known, which his Omniscency overlooked when the Books of the Prophecies were sealed; – thus beguiling 'the ignorant and the unstable' and leading them 'from the Simplicity of the Gospel, to trust in Lying Vanities'.⁶²

⁶² *Ecce Homo. Critical remarks on the infamous publications of John Parkins of Little Gonerby near Grantham* (Grantham, 1819).

Crucially, it is impossible to tease apart the roles of cunning man, prophet and astrologer in the attack on Parkins, and links are forged here between Parkins's astrological prophecies and representations of cunning folk as fraudsters. As J. F. C. Harrison has argued, 'Belief in millenarianism was . . . facilitated, and its forms determined by folk culture . . . Millenarian prophets, no less than the early Methodist preachers, when they took their message to the people, found a basis for understanding and sympathy in some elements of folk culture and popular religion'.⁶³ Patrick Curry has further cited comparisons between the astrological omen and biblical prophecies published in almanacs to demonstrate that the same people who turned to popular prophecy also comprised 'the constituency for popular astrology'.⁶⁴ Modalities of popular magic and prophecy were crucially interconnected and were often brought into direct comparison with each other.

The distinction between prophecy and fortune-telling lay in the scale and reach of their predictions. As political pressures mounted, however, the distinction between public and private spheres, national and local events, the body politic and the individual's body, began to break down. This meant that *all* modes of prognostication could be considered as political acts – even the casting of individual nativities. As Harrison notes:

Fortune-telling and crystal gazing were unlikely to produce more than a local trade; but pronouncements about dearth and plenty, wars, plagues and the

⁶³ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p.54.

⁶⁴ Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 116.

significance of comets could raise the status of a cunning man until he was looked upon as a prophet.⁶⁵

Magical practitioners who sought recognition on more public stages – and by means of more public discourses – could take advantage of this increasing proximity between prophecy and popular magic at a time when the imagination was creatively pressured by political events. The case of Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) is exemplary here. The rise of a Devonshire farmer's daughter to the level of nationally recognised prophetess who appealed to both metropolitan and rural cultures, men and women, the middle classes and the abject poor, demonstrated the possibilities open to would-be prophets in a fraught, post-revolutionary political climate. Southcott's claims to direct communication with God and the devil align her with occult modes of prophetic vision, and her early career as a 'wise-woman' firmly locates her at a point of intersection between prophecy and popular magic. The career had humble beginnings. During the 1790s, Southcott had been regarded as a wise-woman by her local rural Devonshire community. The Richard family, for example, had sought her advice to combat malign witchcraft. As Val Lewis reminds us,

They had been mysteriously losing one of two of their cattle every day and were convinced it was the result of witchcraft. They approached Joanna for help and she told them to write on pieces of parchment the words 'Holiness to

⁶⁵ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 47.

the Lord’ and to put the pieces inside their horses’ bridles. It apparently worked, for they soon stopped losing their cattle.⁶⁶

Further, local villagers turned to Southcott to interpret dreams and for prophecies concerning the success of harvests and the safe return of absent family members – services that were typical of those offered by cunning folk throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as we shall see.⁶⁷ Southcott’s career exemplifies how entwined complementary and competing occult cultures were during the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. Southcott was desperate, as Lewis notes, ‘to be acknowledged not merely as a soothsayer – for there were plenty of them in Devon – but as a divinely chosen messenger of God’.⁶⁸ Aspects of Southcott’s roots as a cunning woman continued to be manifest themselves in her later career (despite her claims to the contrary). Following her arrival in London in 1802, she began to sell ‘seals of the Lord’ to her followers as a means of divine protection. These obscure messages, scribbled onto pieces of parchment, harked back to the bridle charms she had herself issued, and the talismanic healing charms used by her grandmother Godfrey – an established cunning woman.⁶⁹ Despite her insistence that her communications were divinely ordained, many still associated her divinations with ‘magic powers’ – or worse, satanic influence (a possibility with which Southcott herself wrestles in the

⁶⁶ Val Lewis, *Satan’s Mistress: The Extraordinary Story of the Eighteenth Century Fanatic Joanna Southcott and her Lifelong Battle with the Devil* (Middlesex: Nauticalia, 1997), p 66.

⁶⁷ Lewis, *Satan’s Mistress*, pp. 21-2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁹ The Richards also looked to Southcott for healing charms in the 1790s. Written parchments were to be placed inside the bonnet of the afflicted and worn until the ailment – in Mrs. Richard’s case, a migraine – was alleviated. See Lewis, *Satan’s Mistress*, pp. 21-2 and p. 66.

conflicted exchanges and metacommentaries of a work such as *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* (1802)).⁷⁰ Those who associated Southcott with witchcraft rather than prophecy were quick to use her as a scapegoat for unexplained misfortunes. As James K. Hopkins emphasises,

If some saw Joanna as a wise woman who could protect individual members of the community from witchcraft, others were convinced that she herself was a witch. Joanna believed that it was God who inspired her predictions of bad harvests. Her enemies, however, heard her prophecies as maledictions and saw her not as the handmaiden of the Lord, but as a witch moved by malign influence.⁷¹

The Southcott family had once been respected landowners. Joanna's father frequently bemoaned the series of unfortunate events that led to Joanna's grandfather being denied his rightful financial inheritance, as Joanna reveals in her *Second Book of Wonders* (1813). Following her grandfather's death, his widow was left destitute, and their son (Joanna's father) was forced to toil in order to establish himself as a tenant farmer, battling a series of poor harvests and economic hardship. Southcott's identity, filtered through her father's melodramatic narratives of lost gentility, registered generational and personal disappointment. 'All the Southcotts were proud', she

⁷⁰ Joanna Southcott, *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* (London, 1802).

⁷¹ James K. Hopkins, *A Woman to Deliver her People: Joanna Southcott and English Millenarianism in an Era of Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 27.

admitted, 'and though we were come to nothing, still we were a proud, empty family. And that I'll grant is true: a bottle filled with wine wants no more, but an empty bottle wants to be filled'.⁷² (The image of the bottle was to return in her prophetic writings, a reminder of both her own familial loss and spiritual dearth/abundance). 'Empty' is the key term here. Her personal history, as she tells it, is a narrative of a trajectory not from obscurity to influence but rather from possession to subsequent loss to compensatory authority. Southcott's identity as a wise-woman and then as prophetess is a means to recoup that loss – an opportunity to reactivate her status as cunning woman in the form of apocalyptic prophecy, to regain the respect of a local community in the form of a national role.

Adjacent Cultures: Astrology

A further adjacent culture that this thesis seeks to bring into focus is that of astrology. Popular magic and prognostication were frequently interrelated. Divination took many forms. Dream interpretation, scrying (the use of reflective surfaces such as mirrors, crystal or pools of water) or reading tea leaves, moles or palms were strategies more typically associated with fortune-tellers (though, of course, they were also frequently employed by cunning folk). Among these forms of future-telling, astrology was regarded as a more scholarly venture, and as such it appears to have been the pursuit of 'higher-tier' magical practitioners such as cunning men and conjurors. Many (but by no means all) cunning folk claimed to be adept in astrology. Lincolnshire-based cunning man John Parkins proclaimed 'I can read the heavens as well as I can read the

⁷² Joanna Southcott, *The Second Book of Wonders Marvellous and True* (London: Marchant and Galabin, 1813), p. 108.

Bible', and casting nativities formed part of the repertoire of the Denbigshire conjuror Mochyn-y-Nant.⁷³ Similarly, not all of those who practised astrology would have expanded into other areas of magical practice, nor would they necessarily have identified themselves as cunning folk.

Astrologers enjoyed increased popularity in the 1790s as celestial prognostication offered some comfort during a period fraught with instability. Curry's *Prophecy and Power* identifies three major strains of astrology that operated during the period. The first – 'Popular astrology' – was more readily associated with the practice of cunning men and fortune-tellers. This brand of astrology also found literary expression in the form of almanacs, which aimed to 'provide guidance or enlightenment in all areas of major concern to its readers throughout the year ahead', and appealed to consumers from both the middle and lower classes, who consulted the texts for information on a wide range of issues, 'from the weather, agriculture and husbandry, to the larger events of politics wars and natural disasters'.⁷⁴ *Vox Stellarum* (or *Moore's Almanac*) enjoyed particular success with an annual print order of 353,000 copies by the end of the century thanks to its 'annual comprehensiveness and reliability, deeply comforting beyond the tabloid sensationalism of its astral revelations'.⁷⁵ 'Judicial astrology' – the art of reading the movement of celestial bodies as having a precise effect on human existence – also saw a rise in popularity during the 1790s. This practice, also known as 'horary astrology', relied on interpreting the

⁷³ See John Parkins, *The Book of Miracles; or, Celestial Museum, being an Entertaining and Instructive Treatise of Love, Law, Trade and Physic with the Bank of Heaven* (London: Parkins, 1817), p. 17, and *The Conjuror of Ruabon: Being the Life and Mysterious Transactions of John Roberts, known by the name of Mochyn-y-Nant, or the Pig of the Brook, Lately Deceased* (Ellesmere: W. Baugh, 1806).

⁷⁴ Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 101.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

positions of the stars at a certain point in history to predict events in the life of a certain individual: 'Its indispensable emblem was the horoscope, drawn up for a specific moment, at a specific place, which was then interpreted or "judged"'.⁷⁶ Occupying a middle ground between popular and high astrology, judicial readings were far more complex than those performed by cunning men and fortune-tellers, but their firm interest in the lives of individuals (even when dealing with political figures) meant that judicial astrologers were often met with criticism from their more philosophical cosmological counterparts. Lastly, Curry profiles the decline of the 'high astrology' that had more in common with natural philosophy and relied directly on astronomical theory in place of traditional horoscopes:

This use of astrological ideas was concerned with questions about the structure, functioning and governance of the universe. Since the latter includes the earth, this concern often resulted in implications and predictions about earthly functioning and governance.⁷⁷

Curry notes the clear social and intellectual differences bound up with the distinction between a high, cosmological astrology and a more popular incarnation – between 'a self-defined "sacred" astrology, based on theology and natural philosophy, and a "profane" astrology, based on popular religion and folk wisdom – superstition and ignorance, respectively, in the eyes of its high counterpart'.⁷⁸ 'High' astrology fell into decline by the end of the eighteenth century as astronomy began to professionalise

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 138.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

itself as a science – part of that professionalisation involving a rejection of the ‘quackery’ of astrology.

These various branches of celestial prognostication operated simultaneously, and astrologers fought to locate their particular brand of divination in a hybrid scientific-occult economy. R. Phillips’s *The Celestial Science of Astrology Vindicated, from the Calumny of those who are Biggotted [sic] against what they do not Understand* (1785), had defended astrology by making a clear distinction between the art itself and the honesty and ability of the astrologer: ‘it was not the science that was condemned, but its ignorant professors . . . who pretend to understand more than they do’.⁷⁹ Phillips quotes the astrologer Partridge (famously, Swift’s victim):

Astrology is now like a dead carcass to which every crow or rook resorts, and takes a mouthful, then flies to the next tree or another convenient place, and with his croaking noise, tells the world he has brought away the whole body in his bill.⁸⁰

This mistrust survived into the 1790s, and would be echoed by Thomas de Quincey in 1848: ‘I believe in Astrology, but not in astrologers’.⁸¹ Rival astrologers sought to legitimise their own trade, and bitter disagreements often flared, making it difficult for contemporary Londoners to know whose astrological methods to trust. Figures such as John Worsdale (who lived and practiced in Lincoln, but earned the attention of

⁷⁹ R. Phillips, *The Celestial Science of Astrology Vindicated, from the Calumny of those who are Biggotted [sic] against what they do not Understand* (London, 1785), p. 7.

⁸⁰ Partridge, quoted in Phillips, *The Celestial Science of Astrology*, p. 7.

⁸¹ See Thomas de Quincey, ‘Article for the Glasgow Athenaeum Album: 1848’, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Robert Morrison, 16 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), pp. 289–304.

Londoners) championed astrology as ‘a science neither magical nor modern, neither occult nor mechanistic, but based on rational Aristotelian principles and mathematical procedures’.⁸² His contemporary, Ebenezer Sibly, did not share this elitist view. His *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences* (1784), a sprawling text that aimed to reconfigure the judicial astrological doctrine of the seventeenth century, was highly eclectic.⁸³ He welcomed freemasonry, Mesmerism and the scientific literature of the period, as well as recognising the importance of magic. As Curry suggests:

Sibly fervently believed that modern scientific knowledge, while valuable, needed to be supplemented by the vitalism and spirituality of the natural magic tradition. Only in this way, he felt, would it be possible to preserve the crucial connections between man, the microcosm, and the universe, the macrocosm, and their equal dependence on divinity.⁸⁴

Worsdale remained elitist, believing astrology to be an intellectual, scholarly pursuit. In the dedication of one his books, he voiced this belief, stating: ‘I do not require the Vulgar and Illiterate to busy themselves with a subject of this nature’, assuring his select readers that it is ‘those that are learned in the Sydereal mysteries, I only appeal to in this case’.⁸⁵ Sibly, however, appealed to the middle classes, those ‘of a growing middle-brow no-man’s-land’, as Curry puts it, ‘formerly on the borders of popular

⁸² Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 132.

⁸³ Ebenezer Sibly, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences: Or, The Art of Foretelling Future Events and Contingencies* (London, 1795).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸⁵ John Worsdale, *The Nativity of Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France; Calculated According to the Genuine Rules and Precepts of the Learned Claudius Ptolemy* (Stockport, 1805), p. x.

magic but under the sway of elite religion and natural philosophy'.⁸⁶ This brand of occult astrology enabled practitioners such as Richard James Morrison ('Zadkiel') and Robert Cross Smith ('Raphael'), and their successors of the same inherited, deathless pseudonyms, to continue the popularity of a middle-class engagement with celestial prognostication into the Victorian period. 'Popular astrology' (Curry's term) in the form of almanacs (and in particular, *Vox Stellarum*, Francis Moore's almanac) sold in high numbers. Curry claims, however, that this modality of the astrological occult faded from oppositional political discourse in the 1790s, suggesting that 'none of the later eighteenth-century radicals – Wilkes, Priestley, Godwin, Paine – used it as an interpretive or rhetorical resource'.⁸⁷ My own investigation of the cultural impact of *The Conjuror's Magazine* in Chapter 1 seeks to cast new light on Curry's claims, exposing 'lower' forms of astrology as being robustly implicated in political debates.

Discourses of prognostication reflected the political turmoil that characterised the decade. Future-telling had a particularly pivotal role in times of political uncertainty. Those who professed this knowledge inherited a grave responsibility. Across Europe, political instability had been intensified by millenarian prophecy and fear of apocalypse. Foreknowledge brought comfort to many, and future-telling existed in multiple forms, from astrology to religious prophecy, practised by a range of magical practitioners that included gypsies, fortune tellers and cunning men. In many respects, political and economic uncertainty fuelled the survival of the magic trade. As we shall see, *The Conjuror's Magazine* illuminatingly exemplifies the conflicted manifestations of a metropolitan occult in the 1790s. Further, I argue that the

⁸⁶ Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 136.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

magazine also intervenes in important ways in the political debates of the decade and that its influence operates dynamically in the period's imaginative literature. A fresh examination of the cultural reach of the plural discourses of the astrological occult in *The Conjuror's Magazine* sheds new light on Romantic literature's interest in prognostication, on acts of reading nature as a political text, on the casting of personal and public nativities, and on political and poetical 'jugglery'.

The 1790s Occult: Historical and Literary Contours

My opening chapter provides a profile of cunning folk and their services as distinct from the wider occult cultures outlined above. This is carefully attuned to the work of social historians in order to identify those figures and practices that Romantic Studies has (wrongly) presumed no longer existed and provide a new context for the readings of 1790s literary and political culture that follow. The material manifestations of the cunning man's trade are here delineated, using historical evidence to profile the contours of popular magic during the period. The chapter features three 'case studies' which investigate in detail some of the textual evidence for magical practices that exist from the Romantic period, including two multi-layered biographies recording the lives and occupations of contemporary cunning men, the evangelical tracts of Hannah More, and the alarmist pamphlets published in the wake of the execution of the notorious cunning woman and murderess, Mary Bateman. Finally, Chapter 1 will turn to *The Conjuror's Magazine*, the monthly periodical published from 1791 to 1794. This occult miscellany usefully reveals the fluid interaction between multiple modes of the occult in the period. Here, traditional folk remedies, highbrow astrology, Mesmerism, esoteric philosophy, fortune telling, palmistry, ghost stories and tales of recovered

treasure all jostle for space. Published by the French Huguenot, Henry Lemoine, and featuring a host of both radical and reactionary contributors, the magazine became a fascinating forum for political discussion.

As noted, in a period of intense political upheaval and uncertainty, many turned to the village conjuror for predictions, protection and a sense of stability and continuity. For some, the occult offered a comforting sense that they might achieve some measure of control over their lives (and those of their neighbours), while others recognised the fact that practitioners exploited the fears of vulnerable individuals. On a national level, as I will argue in Chapter 2, Edmund Burke, alarmed by the political theology of Richard Price's radical sermon of 1789, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, characterised the dissenting preacher as a conjuror who entranced his congregation with revolutionary rhetoric. Thomas Paine's rejoinder was to accuse Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* itself of political jugglery in the form of Burke's use of transformative metaphor – a spell that could be broken only by Paine's democratic, seemingly unembellished discourse (in reality an equally potent form of suasive language, of course). The battle over language (who controlled it, and who deployed it most effectively) was fraught, especially in the early years of the decade, when political theorists and polemicists sought to debunk – unhex – the bewitching tactics of their opponents.

The second half of Chapter 2 focuses on the orator, political theorist and poet John Thelwall. Driven into 'inner exile' in 1797 as an 'acquitted felon', having been the subject of a relentless state-sponsored campaign, Thelwall spent three years in Llyswen, Brecknockshire, on the banks of the river Wye. This period in his life is too often dismissed as merely a bridge between the two 'public' stages of his career – the

first political, the second as a speech theorist and therapist. Focusing on the Llyswen years and on the poetry produced there, I explore the ways in which Thelwall can be seen to have fashioned an identity as a conjuror in response to the local suspicion he profiles in the autobiographical preface to his *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (1801). The adoption of this occult identity – at once marginal and central, exilic and local, political and otherworldly – seemed to suit Thelwall very well at this juncture. Estranged from the intellectual community of embattled radicals in London and the provinces (including Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset), alienated by a village that distrusted him and by a language he did not understand, Thelwall recognised both the practical and literary uses of the *performance* of pariah status and power enshrined in the figure of the cunning man. Thus I argue that the conjuror/cunning man figure played an important role in Thelwall's reinvention and rehabilitation.

A central contention of this study is that the social empowerment offered by practical popular magic and by the adoption of an occult identity was also profoundly recognised by Wordsworth in the 1790s. Chapter 3 focuses on Wordsworth's contributions to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. I seek a radical defamiliarisation of *Lyrical Ballads* through the lens of the occult, revealing the ways in which its poems are embedded in contemporary occult discourse and practice. What is conducted in *Lyrical Ballads*, I suggest, is nothing less than a debate regarding the social (and literary) uses of the occult – a debate in which Robert Southey was also significantly involved. Wordsworth's investment in the rural occult (particularly that of his local Somerset) offered the disenfranchised lower classes represented in *Lyrical Ballads* a mode of social and linguistic empowerment. Figures such as Goody Blake and Martha Ray are central to a political project that explores the potentialities of the occult as an

agent of social emancipation in ways that challenge contemporary conceptions of charity, gender and class.

Chapter 4 focuses on Coleridge's poetry of the mid-to-late-1790s. Tracing Coleridge's turn from revolutionary radicalism to uneasy apostasy, I seek to intervene in the critical debate concerning the failure of Coleridge's poetry satisfactorily to accord with the socio-political manifesto of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. I suggest that Coleridge regarded popular magic anxiously as a covert system of oppression and control, and that his poetry developed in a completely different direction to Wordsworth's as a result. Looking back at the radical millenarian-prophetic mode of his poetry earlier in the decade, Coleridge regretted his former lack of scepticism and articulated his fin-de-siècle position in the 1798 quarto.

My final chapter investigates magic as the site of apostate anxiety for Robert Southey. I contend that his *Poems 1799* (several of which had been published in *The Morning Post*) sceptically assess, and revise, Wordsworth's commitment in *Lyrical Ballads* to the occult as social empowerment for the disenfranchised. I argue that what I characterise as Southey's remedial rewritings of Wordsworth's ballads sought to expose living, material cultures of folk magic as self-perpetuating entrapment for the socially marginalised, while allowing Southey to enact a conservative fantasy that began to appear increasingly appealing during the closing years of the decade. Southey's sprawling epic *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) offers readers a rich mix of supernatural motifs, colonial fantasy and oriental ritual, prophecy, occult philosophy and atavistic sorcery. The dangerously conservative (yet strangely alluring) villainous sorceresses, Khwala and Maimuna, appear out of place in the context of the mystical, ancient setting of the poem. Their folk-charms, I argue, are more easily recognised as

those practised by cunning people and wise-women who were operating much closer to home. Written at the height of Southey's apostate anxiety, the oriental drama is the site of a debate with Wordsworth regarding political identities and the uses of the occult at the end of a revolutionary decade.

Chapter 1: A Profile of Romantic-period Popular Magic: Taxonomies of Evidence

The newly configured Witchcraft Act (1735; 9 Geo. 2 c. 5) rendered magic a practice and system outside the purview – and worldview – of English law. In legal terms, cunning folk were no longer committing a crime by practising magic, but legal proceedings taken against magical practitioners by no means ceased. In fact, social historian Owen Davies suggests that ‘until the nineteenth century the rate of prosecution was probably roughly the same as it had been over the past 200 years’¹ – though, importantly, cunning folk who found themselves on the wrong side of the law would now face secular charges of financial deceit, fraud or vagrancy.² The newly secular force of legal proceedings involving witchcraft led to an (inaccurate) retrospective belief that this reflected the sudden and complete dissolution of a belief in witchcraft during the period. As outlined in my introduction, historians of the occult have often neglected to excavate the occult cultures of the mid-eighteenth century, and what they bequeathed to subsequent centuries, for this very reason. However, the legal reclassification of magical practice did not result in the sudden attenuation of their power and influence in local contexts. Typically, the only people who would press charges would be unsatisfied customers who believed sufficiently in the power of magic to have sought a cunning man’s intervention in the first place, but who felt let down by the individual practitioner – an important distinction that was obscured by

¹ Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003), p. 21.

² See, for instance, the July 1791 report of Berkeley Burland, Chairman of the Somerset Quarter Sessions, who attempted to argue for clemency for Martha Biggs, convicted for ‘*pretending* to exercise witchcraft’, on account of her age. National Archives, Kew, HO 47/13/45. See also an indictment for fraud in Skipton, Yorkshire, in July 1798 regarding the protection of cattle from destruction by witchcraft; West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield, QS1/137/5.

the newly secular legal discourse. The presence of cunning folk in legal records argues for their continued influence during the period.

Identifying practitioners of popular magic by means of census records is, however (as one might expect), challenging. Magic may not have been an illegal practice, but practitioners' relationship with the law remained ambiguous, and this is likely to have dissuaded them from recording their professions in any official documentation. Many cunning men and women held down secondary professions, and it is these more 'respectable' trades that were typically recorded on official documents. Practitioners were not always seriously invested in these sidelines – nor were they always intended as a financial prop. It is said of Edward Savage ('Old Savage', 1759–1849) of Llangurig, for instance, that while he was identified as 'a small farmer, a herb doctor, and gun-smith', he derived 'his chief source of income from his more superstitious fellow-mortals'.³ Owen Davies argues that these figures' alternative occupations may have provided 'legitimate fronts' behind which 'they could continue their illegitimate operations'.⁴ Here, there is a distinction to be made between illegality and illegitimacy – one that has been problematically over-simplified historically. The Witchcraft Act of 1735 might have reclassified the legal status of magic in courtrooms, but this hardly resulted in a sudden change in age-old popular belief; nor did it suddenly change an inherited understanding of the relation between magical practice and the law. For many people (and practitioners), the pre-1735 status of magic as a criminal offence remained part of their social outlook. It is no surprise,

³ Edward Hamer, *The History of the Parish of Llangurig* (London: T. Richards, 1875), p. 114. Also see Davies p. 64 for more examples.

⁴ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 74.

therefore, that some cunning folk continued to be cautious when it came to official documents – even if they were happy to identify themselves and promote their services by word-of-mouth in their local communities (as well as further afield). It is clear that, regardless of legal standing, the stigma of both illegality and spiritual danger that attached historically to occult practice continued to colour perceptions of the cunning trade throughout the period.

Cunning folk were not acting illegally by claiming to have ‘supernatural’ abilities. Sceptical onlookers, however, saw practitioners as deliberately misleading desperate victims in order to extort money. Having witnessed the practice of ‘Bella’, the fortune-teller of Denbigh – whose ‘jargon nonsense’ enabled both herself and her daughter to ‘live and dress well’ – on his walking tour of North Wales (around the year 1800), artist and travel-writer Edward Pugh scathingly commented that ‘it is a pity that these impostors should be allowed to cheat the deluded poor’.⁵ The *Taunton Courier* of 1819 stated that conjurors and cunning folk were ‘fattening on the silly prejudices of the weak-minded’.⁶ Certainly, some practitioners were corrupt, and less scrupulous cunning folk are known to have relentlessly pursued credulous and vulnerable clients.⁷ Others, however, appear to have genuinely believed in their own abilities, making the legal charge of ‘fraud’ problematic. The culture addressed here is one of living individuals – each with personal agendas, economic, social and psychological needs, and belief systems. While legal documents can help us to construct an ‘official’ view of

⁵ Edward Pugh, *Cambria Depicta: A Tour Through North Wales* (London, 1816), pp. 391–2.

⁶ *Taunton Courier* (18 March 1819).

⁷ An example is Mary Bateman, the Yorkshire witch whose crimes are recorded in a number of pamphlets of the period, such as *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman the Yorkshire Witch* (Leeds: Edward Baines 1809) and Vincent’s *The Wonderful Life and Remarkable Trial of Mary Bateman* (London: T. Broom and W. Evans 1809).

the status of popular magic during the period, the usefulness of the data mined from these sources is compromised by the very secularisation of legal discourse.

Practitioners of magic took multiple forms. Cunning folk, conjurors, astrologers, sorcerers and wise men/women, as well as regional variations such as the 'dyn hysbys' in Wales and the 'pellar' in Cornwall, laid claim to their own areas of expertise. Seeking to identify the range of practices, cultures and beliefs that shared (and competed for) intellectual and social space during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Richard Suggett's work adopts a stringent taxonomic approach (aided by the limited geographical spread of his study). Suggett carefully disaggregates conjurors (literate and often academically invested in their craft) from 'low status' occult practitioners such as sorcerers and itinerant fortune-tellers, while he deploys 'cunning man' as a term denoting those practitioners who operated as generalists.⁸ Owen Davies also identifies a 'hierarchy' of occult practitioners. While fortune-tellers were 'thought to possess certain natural intuitive skills', their abilities were considered to be more modest than those of the cunning man, whose reputation relied on 'a combination of innate ability, natural prescience and acquired arcane knowledge'.⁹

By its very nature, however, popular magic (like the wider cultures of the occult within which it takes its place) resists rigid frameworks of taxonomic definition, and modalities of popular magic are more fruitfully seen as elastic roles and categories located on a continuum. In this thesis, the term 'popular magic' will be used to refer to those practices deployed as part of a service-driven, material and economic trade –

⁸ Richard Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2008).

⁹ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 71.

the everyday charms and spells that existed at a point of intersection between the marvellous and the mundane. Following the framework used by Suggett, I use the term 'cunning man/woman' to denote the magical practitioners who offered such services, and 'conjuror' to refer to those (predominantly male) practitioners who claimed, or were perceived to possess, a serious literary/academic interest in their craft. 'Witches' continued throughout the period to be the term for individuals accused of acts of malign magic that were believed to blight, rather than serve, the community.

It is impossible to profile cunning folk without considering witches. While the term 'witch' was often problematically conflated with other terms for the various 'categories' of magical practitioners, cunning folk were typically defined by their (antagonistic) relationship to malevolent magic, and were hired to protect against the 'ill wishes' of witches. The very existence of cunning folk and the services they offered presupposes a belief in witchcraft. While magical practitioners were viewed as agents of equilibrium and regulation for their community, they were also responsible for inciting (or, at the very least, reaffirming) fear and mistrust. Witches continued to be identified as the perpetrators of curses and 'ill-wishing', and cunning folk advertised themselves as their 'adversaries'.¹⁰ The relentless self-advertiser John Parkins claimed that

¹⁰ Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 107.

I am at this time full proof against all the art and power of all witches, wizards, evil spirits, wicked men and women, fiends of the Bottomless Pitt, and all the Devils that ever can be found either on the Earth or under the Earth.¹¹

The employment of cunning folk as a means of protection against malign forces (evidenced by the number of preventative charms against 'ill-wishing' dating from this period)¹² reveals a continuing, deep-seated fear of malediction and witchcraft. Bewitchment could manifest itself in various forms: it could attack the health of a person or could threaten both individual and community wellbeing by affecting harvests or livestock.

The activities of cunning folk were largely unsensational. They dealt with everyday problems and the mundane nature of their brand of occult service ensured that their practices went largely unrecorded. As noted in my introduction, evidence of their day-to-day practice is scarce. However, this is by no means indicative of a lack of activity – the extant evidence confirms that cunning folk continued to ply their trade throughout the Romantic period and beyond. The services sought from cunning folk were diverse, and practitioners' repertoires were by no means identical. Nor were they limited in scope and reach. As Owen Davies notes, the activities of cunning folk continued to impinge on 'all aspects of people's lives' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – 'on health, love, marriage, and business'.¹³ Cunning folk were

¹¹ Parkins, *The Book of Miracles*, p. 69.

¹² Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 112.

¹³ Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736–1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 215.

multifaceted practitioners, employing, to quote Davies again, ‘herbalism, astrology, fortune-telling and charms to seek solutions to their client’s problems’.¹⁴ Clients sought out cunning folk to diagnose and combat unexplained misfortune. Some would seek supernatural protection from unseen malevolent forces, while others simply wanted to know if a better future lay in store for them, and how to attain it. Still others sought counter-charms to reverse the effects of curses they believed had been put on their capital, whether in the form of their livestock or their own bodily person. A cunning man would typically identify a witch as the source of malign magic. Henry Harries of Cwrt-y-Cadno, Carmarthenshire, claimed to be able to determine the following range of personal characteristics and the individual’s related prospects:

Temper, disposition, fortunate or unfortunate in their general pursuits, honour, riches, journeys and voyages (success therein, and what places best to travel in or reside in), friends and enemies, trade or profession best to follow, and whether fortunate in speculation, viz: lottery, dealing in foreign markets, etc.¹⁵

Cunning folk played enigmatic and multifaceted roles as healers, detectives, and advisors. They were consulted on financial matters (often to predict the result of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Henry Harries, *Nativities Calculated*, MS. 11, 119B, National Library of Wales.

lotteries or to provide charms for gambling)¹⁶ and were asked to seek both hidden treasure and potential lovers.¹⁷ They professed the ability to diagnose (and provide supernatural protection from) malevolent forces, and employed a range of divinatory techniques (including astrology) to reveal the future and to identify thieves and return stolen objects. Significantly, London-based bookseller, editor and chapbook-writer Henry Lemoine (1752–1812) identified the regulatory, juridical role of cunning folk as ‘of more service than the county gaol or gallows’¹⁸ while the anonymous author of the pamphlet *The Conjuror of Ruabon* (a text we shall return to shortly) argued as follows:

There is one thing . . . [that] may be said as an apology for the Character of a Conjuror, that he frequently caused those to deal honestly, who, but for the reported power of such people, would act in open defiance of all Laws, both human and divine; and plunder their Neighbours with Impunity’.¹⁹

In 1848, Thomas De Quincey published ‘Sortilege on Behalf of the Glasgow Athenaeum’, a ludic recollection of his 1802 encounter with an astrologer at Penrycae (a village near Wrexham) known as Mochyn-y-Nant (‘pig of the dingle’). De Quincey gives a serio-comic account of his seventeen-year-old self (on the run from

¹⁶ An account of conjurors writing and selling charms for success in cock fighting is given by Hamer, who reports that these charms continued to be deployed until the sport was banned by the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1835. See Hamer, *The History of the Parish of Llangurig*, p. 116.

¹⁷ Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 228.

¹⁸ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris, better known by the name of Dick Spot, the Conjuror, particularly in Derbyshire and Shropshire, written by an old acquaintance, who was a critical observer of all his actions for near fifty years* (London: Ann Lemoine, 1799), p. 39.

¹⁹ *The Conjuror of Ruabon: being the Life and Mysterious Transactions of John Roberts, known by the Name of Mochyn-Y-Nant, the Pig of the Brook* (Ellesmere: W. Baugh, 1820?), p. 8.

Manchester Grammar School), who, having heard of the reputation of the mysterious astrologer from a young woman at Wrexham, ventured to meet him to satisfy his curiosity. Damian Walford Davies's article 'Pig in a Dingle: De Quincey and the Romantic Culture of the Occult' (2010) deploys evidence cited by social historians to identify the mysterious Mochyn-y-Nant (given as '*Mochinahante*' in De Quincey's garbled Welsh) as the Denbighshire conjuror John Roberts (1716—1806).²⁰ De Quincey's portrait of a man presented as at once scapegoat, potential treason-hatcher, owner and defender of land, victim of poverty and the subject of pity, suspicion and respect is clearly a literary performance and a mode of what might call autobiographiction, written forty-six years after the event. However, as Walford Davies has shown by reading De Quincey's account in the context of the anonymous pamphlet *The Conjuror of Ruabon: being the Life and Mysterious Transactions of John Roberts* (c. 1820), we can be certain that Mochyn-y-Nant existed, and can hazard that the encounter between the seventeen-year-old writer and the grubby astrologer is likely to have actually happened [fig. 1]. Given De Quincey's imaginative shaping of his life, we may certainly question how reliable he is as first-hand witness to the survival of occult practice during the period. However, beneath the literary performance and ironies is a first-hand account of a living occult practitioner that offers an insight into the wider contexts of his operations.

De Quincey's account of Mochyn-y-Nant is indicative of the problem of evidence on a wider scale. The challenge De Quincey's self-consciously literary and playful account offers the social historian searching for historical testimony also

²⁰ Damian Walford Davies, 'Pig in a Dingle: De Quincey and the Romantic Culture of the Occult', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5580 (March 2010), pp. 13—15.

characterises much of the surviving textual evidence relating to practitioners of popular magic in the period. The following profile of popular magic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries surveys the *types* of textual evidence available to us, while simultaneously exploring what that evidence can tell us about the status of cunning folk as practising tradesmen, the clientele they serviced and the impact their activities had on a broader cultural level. Accessing this information requires us to negotiate multiple narrative voices and attune ourselves to the rhetorical effects of the written text, to the authors' social and economic agendas, and to the aporiae of memory.

First-Hand Experiences of Popular Magic – The Paucity of Evidence

The activities of cunning folk were part of national as well as local and regional life during the period. News of a cunning man's success could travel many miles via word-of-mouth. Lemoine said of Shropshire-based Richard Morris that 'from all the country round, Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire, Warwick, Leicestershire, Cheshire and Yorkshire, the people poured in to this wonderful predictor of future events'.²¹

Further, as Alan Macfarlane observes, 'The distance travelled cannot be used to measure the availability of cunning folk'; rather, it serves as evidence of how far clients were willing to go to receive what they regarded as the very best service.²²

Fuelling the rumour-mill was therefore an important part of the cunning man's trade. For instance, given the role of the cunning man as a regulatory force – in effect a local detective – the very threat of a cunning man's intervention would often be enough to

²¹ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, p. 39; p. 28.

²² Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 121.

frighten thieves into returning stolen objects. John Lupton of Bedlington had his purloined pocketbook returned to him as soon as the news spread of his having consulted a cunning woman in April 1807.²³ Building and maintaining a dynamic reputation was a crucial aspect of a cunning person's professional life, and skilfully positioning oneself within networks of village gossip could provide a significant boost to business – a culture with which Wordsworth would engage in poems such as 'The Thorn' to dramatise networks of hearsay that could be both destructive and – as I shall argue – potentially (if never wholly unproblematically) liberating. It might benefit a practitioner's reputation if he operated with an air of mystery; the anonymous contributor 'B' claimed in *The Conjuror's Magazine* of January 1792 that 'secrecy is the very soul of telesmes [talismans]', but cunning folk ultimately needed to be well-known and easily locatable to attract business.²⁴

Cunning folk existed as part of a mostly oral tradition and their services were largely advertised by word of mouth. As Richard Suggett argues, a cunning man's ability was only as potent as his clients perceived it to be, meaning that 'the conjuror was increasingly a showman'.²⁵ Theatricality, together with tactics of delay and misdirection were, an important part of the cunning man's craft. Thomas Hancock's 1873 *History of Llanrhaiadr-ym-Mochnant* (which, like Hamer's *History of Llangurig* was compiled from the transactions of the Montgomeryshire Historical Society) records that when 'Bwm-baili'r cythraul' ('the devil's bum-bailiff', who operated in the Mochnant valley of the Berwyn Mountains in Montgomeryshire in the 1820s) engaged

²³ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 98.

²⁴ *The Conjuror's Magazine* (January 1792) – this secrecy would not last very long; 'B' revealed himself as astrologer William Gilbert in the next issue.

²⁵ Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 98.

in the marvellous act of raising devils, he ‘put on a most grotesque dress, a cap of sheepskin with a high crown, bearing a plume of pigeons’ feathers, and a coat of unusual pattern, with broad hems, and covered with talismanic characters’.²⁶ He also used an eel-skin whip during his conjurations; ‘with this he drew a circle around him, outside of which, at a proper distance, he kept those persons who came to him, whilst he went through his mystic sentences and performances’.²⁷ Keeping his clients at a safe distance ensured they would not witness the mechanics of his legerdemain; Mochyn-y-Nant used similar tactics to keep De Quincey from peering at his (evidently not-so-) arcane texts. Props such as a well-stocked library of occult tomes and grimoires, replete with arcane knowledge, would theatrically reassure clients of their owner’s scholarly credentials. As Arthur Mee’s *Magic in Carmarthenshire* notes,²⁸ the Harries clan of Cwrt-y-Cadno owned an impressive library. Such a possession, historian Russell Davies suggests, ‘was a suspicious habit which ran contrary to the practice of most Welsh householders, who possessed few books . . . usually only a Bible’.²⁹ As Owen Davies further notes, some of the Harries family volumes had no ‘occult value’ and were likely intended merely to ‘pad out the shelves with eye-catching old tomes’.³⁰ As Marcel Mauss puts it in his *A General Theory of Magic*, ‘it is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields’.³¹ In his essay on Welsh folklore (presented at the 1887 Eisteddfod), the nineteenth-century schoolmaster,

²⁶ Thomas W. Hancock, ‘Llanrhaiadr-ym-Mochnant. Its Parochial History and Antiquities’ *Collections Historical and Archaeological Relating to Montgomeryshire* (London: Thomas Richards, 1873), vol. VI, pp. 329.

²⁷ Hancock, ‘Llanrhaiadr-ym-Mochnant. Its Parochial History and Antiquities’, pp. 329–30.

²⁸ Arthur Mee, *Magic in Carmarthenshire: The Harries of Cwrt-y-Cadno* (Cardiff, 1912).

²⁹ Russell Davies, *Hope and Heartbreak: A Social History of Wales and the Welsh 1776–1871* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), p. 361.

³⁰ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 135.

³¹ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 50.

cleric and antiquarian Elias Owen recorded a conversation between John Evans and Dr Bennion of Oswestry (d. 1858) – a gentleman who, Owen informs us, was ‘well known in his lifetime in and about Oswestry, in Wales, [and was] thought to be able to raise Devils’.³² Bennion is said to have counselled John Evans – the last custodian of Ffynnon Elian, a famous cursing well – to

publish it abroad that you can raise the Devil, and the country will believe you, and will credit you with many miracles. All that you have to do afterwards is to be silent, and you will then be as good a raiser of Devils as I am, and I as good as you.³³

Evans’ approach clearly worked to engage the community’s imagination: Bennion reports that ‘the people in a very short time spoke much about me, and they soon came to intrust everything to me, their conduct frightened me, for they looked upon me as if I were a god’.³⁴ As I propose to demonstrate in my exploration of the presence of popular magic tropes in the discourses of the Revolution Controversy, the grip that cunning folk had on the imaginations of their credulous clientele – often based on little more than rhetorical trickery – offered political writers a model for

³² Elias Owen, *Welsh Folk-Lore: A Collection of the Folk-Tales and Legends of North Wales* (Oswestry: Woodall, Minshall and co., 1896), p. 216.

³³ Qtd in Elias Owen, *Welsh Folk-Lore*, p. 216.

³⁴ Qtd. in Owen, *Welsh Folk-Lore*, p. 216.

accusing orators, polemicists and demagogues (another contested taxonomy) of using similar jugglery in the political sphere.

In terms of the *textual* evidence they left behind, Davies notes that cunning folk themselves were 'largely silent and frustratingly diffuse'.³⁵ The largely oral – and thus transient – cultures in which cunning folk operated by their very nature represent problematically diffuse territory for the historian who seeks to unveil cultures of popular magic, and this has resulted in critical misinterpretations of their craft. For instance, practitioners of popular magic cannot be located in one particular demographic. However, from the evidence at his disposal, Owen Davies estimates that while fortune-tellers were more likely to belong to the lower-classes, cunning folk, broadly speaking, belonged to 'a stratum of society that was at least semi-literate and which possessed a certain degree of authority in the community'.³⁶ This is difficult to measure accurately, of course. The suggestion of illegality must have dissuaded many practitioners from openly advertising their names and practice in print, while the 'semi-literate' status of many cunning folk is undeniably a contributing factor in the paucity of surviving written evidence. Suggett's suggestions that cunning folk lived comfortably, and even gained an 'odd respectability', from their craft is problematic: only the most successful and prominent practitioners are likely to have attracted enough attention for their names to have been recorded in print.³⁷ There must have been a great many more cunning men and women who existed closer to the poverty line and who remain anonymous.

³⁵ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁷ Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p.85.

Further, popular magic has also been inaccurately portrayed as a phenomenon belonging specifically to rural cultures. Popular magic continued to be just as relevant to the everyday lives of the inhabitants of towns and cities. The majority of evidence relating to the survival of the cunning man's trade concerns his practice in rural areas, but this does not mean that it did not suffuse urban culture. Patrick Curry has brought into sharp focus the survival of cunning men and conjurors in the metropolis well into the nineteenth century.³⁸ There may be some truth in the argument that geographical distance from centres of law and medicine contributed to a reliance on cunning folk in the provinces; after all, these areas would have been less equipped to deal with illness and crime. However, it is likely that, for historians attempting to reconstruct a cartography of popular magic practice, the reports of cunning folk in urban centres are simply drowned out by the number of self-proclaimed prophets, stage magicians, learned astrologers and practitioners of various other occult and pseudo-scientific practices that competed for prominence in the overcrowded intellectual and economic space of the metropolis and other urban centres in the 1790s.

Lincolnshire cunning man John Parkins (d. 1830s) was unusual in that he published booklets and pamphlets to advertise his craft. Trained by the eminent London-based astrologer and occult philosopher Ebenezer Sibly, Parkins operated from his 'Temple of Wisdom' in Little Gonerby (a village near Grantham). His published texts extended the geographical reach of his fame. The title page of his *Universal Fortune Teller* (1810), originally published in London, notes that it was 'sold by every

³⁸ Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 102–4.

bookseller in town and county'.³⁹ Parkins is likely to have been introduced to publishing by his mentor; Sibly and his brother Manoah were widely published in the fields of astrology and occult philosophy throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Parkins's texts claim to educate his readers in methods of astrology, physiognomy and geomancy, and in divination by cards, moles, dreams, birds and animals. He was a concerted and practised self-promoter. In *The Book of Miracles* (1817), he proclaimed 'I can read the heavens as well as I can read the Bible', maintaining that the abilities of his former mentor were limited to astrology – a service that did not have practical effects:

Though [Sibly] published his *Illustration of the Occult Sciences*, and therein taught the art of calculating nativities; yet, he never was able even so much as to make the attempt to remove any *evils*, &tc. out of the same, as that most important work doth require much higher branches of learning than either him, or any other astrologian in the whole kingdom ever professed to know or understand.⁴⁰

Parkins seeks to use his famous connections to bolster his own reputation and lay claim to 'higher branches of learning' than those possessed by one of the most celebrated occult practitioners of the age. Cunning folk, it seems, operated as

³⁹ John Parkins, *The Universal Fortune-Teller; or, Infallible Guide to the Secret and Hidden Decrees of Fate* (London, 1810).

⁴⁰ John Parkins, *The Book of Miracles; or, Celestial Museum, Being an Entertaining and Instructive Treatise of Love, Law, Trade and Physic with the Bank of Heaven* (Parkins: London, 1817), p. 17.

generalists, and their services could expand into many different fields of knowledge. Evidence suggests that while many (but by no means all) cunning folk claimed to be adept in astrology, some astrologers were known to dabble in practices more readily attributed to cunning men, such as the distribution of charms and spells. Astrologer William Gilbert, for instance, was also employed as a magical talisman-maker,⁴¹ and Davies suggests that 'it was popularly assumed that those who possessed astrological knowledge were also adept in other occult fields'.⁴² The two professions in no way constituted a dogmatic binary during the period. Publications such as Parkins's may offer historians primary evidence, but these commercial pieces, written to suit the needs (and to boost the business) of the practitioner, can offer only a partial insight into the practicalities of their craft.

John Parkins may not have been a typical example of a cunning man. His work as editor of Nicholas Culpeper's seventeenth-century herbal, *The English Physician*, demonstrates that he was an educated man with an academic interest in his field that extended to the realms of occult and natural philosophy. However, what Parkins does offer is an insight into the cultural reach of his publications and the demographic he targeted. The closing pages of his 1809 edition of Culpeper's *Extended English Physician* are made up of Parkins's own 'Family Physician' – a collection of 'most useful known and proved receipts and prescriptions which I have constantly used in my extensive and constant practice for some years past, for the benefit of my

⁴¹ *The Conjuror's Magazine* (February 1792).

⁴² Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 235.

patients'.⁴³ Parkins also includes his 'Present for the Ladies' – a collection of simple recipes for culinary delights such as currant wine and gingerbread.⁴⁴ These practical and domestic additions suggest the diversity of Parkins's target market and the difficulty in strictly demarcating occult practice, medical science and household economy – and thus academic and popular, and male and female, readerships. His *Universal Fortune Teller* sold for 2s 6d, while copies of his *Extended English Physician* cost up to 8s – indicating that Parkins wrote for a middle-class audience that may not necessarily have been the same clientele that would have visited him for personal consultations.

While written accounts by cunning folk regarding the nature of their craft may be rare, practitioners did leave behind material evidence in the form of the written charms they prescribed to patients. These charms would be deployed as cures or as a means of protection against malicious forces. Inscribed onto small pieces of parchment, they would typically be sealed and hung either on the client's person or around their property.⁴⁵ The use of written charms confirms that some practitioners were educated, or at least literate. However, it appears that some relied on the ignorance of their clients to disguise their own lack of occult knowledge. Some cunning folk used technical language and terminology associated with highbrow astrology in their written charms – often hybridised with Latin or pseudo-scientific discourse – in an effort to impress and convince their customers. However, Davies

⁴³ Nicholas Culpeper/John Parkins, *The English Physician; Enlarged with Three Hundred and Sixty-nine Medicines Made of English Herbs. . . to which is Added the Family Physician. . . and A Present for the Ladies*, ed. John Parkins (London: P & R Crosby, 1814), p. 379.

⁴⁴ See Parkins, *The English Physician*, pp. 387–9.

⁴⁵ Owen Davies dedicates an entire chapter of *Popular Magic* to written charms – see Davies, *Popular Magic*, pp. 147–61.

suggests this is often likely to have been mere showmanship; when it came to *understanding* the arcane language deployed, practitioner may have been just as ignorant as client.⁴⁶

Accounts written by the clients of cunning folk are particularly rare, which means that we have access to few intimate perspectives on their craft. Social historians have regarded the lack of this second-tier evidence as indicative of the demographic that made up a large proportion of the cunning man's client base – the uneducated (and likely illiterate) labouring classes. Economic uncertainty ensured that the country labourer continued to rely on cunning folk. Individuals without financial security – those for whom a poor harvest or diseased livestock could spell complete ruin – were the ones who would suffer most from unexplained misfortune; thus they were naturally more inclined to pursue knowledge of future events or seek out supernatural protection. As Robert Southey remarked, practitioners could secure for themselves a 'gainful trade' as long as people had recourse to no more practical response to unexplained misfortune.⁴⁷ However, popular magic was not the exclusive concern of the lower classes; there is clear evidence to suggest that cunning folk attracted clients from more privileged backgrounds. For instance, Henry Lemoine's sympathetic 1799 biographical profile of Shropshire-based conjuror Richard Morris records, for instance, that the fortune-telling talents of the young conjuror attracted 'not women only', nor merely 'persons in love' who came to consult 'upon trivial affairs', but also, significantly, 'men of property and merchants who had vessels upon

⁴⁶ See Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 154 for an example of a written charm featuring the (inaccurate) deployment of technical astrological terminology.

⁴⁷ Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. Jack Simmons (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 295; Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 68.

the sea, [who] were glad of his opinion on the security of their property'.⁴⁸ Edward Hamer's 1870 history of the Parish of Llangurig reveals that Mary Evans, a fortune-teller of Rhos-y-Wrach (Hag's Moor), was also 'frequently consulted by persons who were making trading ventures, purchases' or undertaking 'long journeys'.⁴⁹ Evans earned the nickname 'Mary Pen-y-geiniog' (Mary Head of the Penny) by charging the low price of a penny to divine fortunes by reading tea leaves, though 'she was in the habit of charging those of higher station half-a-crown', revealing both a measure of business acumen on the part of the old woman and sensitivity to the economic status of her local customers.⁵⁰

A scarcity of written evidence by no means suggests that customers' visits were secret affairs. Employing the term 'occult' – which bespeaks hiddenness – in the context of the practice and trade of cunning folk is problematic. The evidence we do have suggests that the commercial practice of magic was by no means secretive. The indeterminacy of their trade in legal terms ensured that cunning folk occupied equivocal space – both at the centre and on the periphery of the community. Their livelihoods depended on maintaining a measure of social visibility. Some practitioners confidently located themselves at the very hub of village life. Richard Morris, for instance, enjoyed a secondary profession as the owner and landlord of The White Horse tavern in Frankwell, near Shrewsbury – a position that would also have practical benefits for his career as cunning man, given that overheard conversations could later

⁴⁸ *Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁹ Hamer, *The History of the Parish of Llangurig*, p. 119. It is not clear from Hamer's text exactly when Evans was practicing, but Hamer implies that she was a contemporary of conjuror Edward Savage (1759–1849), suggesting that she may well have been operating during the Romantic period.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,

be strategically deployed, disguised as supernaturally imparted knowledge. Quoting Southey's *Letters from England* (1807), Owen Davies confirms that cunning folk were to be found 'in every town', where the increased traffic from the surrounding rural areas, especially on market days, guaranteed a 'concentrated customer base'.⁵¹

Our understanding of popular magic in the period is enhanced by another category of evidence afforded by a range of commentators, each with individual agendas: chapbook writers, journalists, polemicists, antiquarians, and of course, the period's imaginative writers. Pre-Restoration chapbooks and pamphlets on the subject of witchcraft and prophecy continued to be reprinted throughout the Romantic period.⁵² However, a number of biographical portraits – one might say reconjurings – of prominent contemporary cunning folk also circulated during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as part of a rapidly expanding popular reading market. *The Extraordinary Life & Character of Mary Bateman*, for instance, had run into its twelfth edition by 1811 – just two years after its original publication (and Bateman's execution) in 1809. William St Clair argues that it is a 'mistake' to suggest that the readership of chapbooks and pamphlets was limited to 'those whose education fitted them for nothing longer or textually more difficult' – although he admits that what he terms this 'marginal reading constituency' often felt 'apologetic, or [were] made to feel guilty for enjoying this form of reading'.⁵³ These multi-valent texts were carefully

⁵¹ Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 295; Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 68.

⁵² See, for example the re-published editions detailing the prophecies of Robert Nixon and Mother Shipton including *The Wonderful History and Suprising Prophecies of Mother Shipton* (London: 1795); *Mother Shipton's Legacy* (York, 1797); *Wonders! Past, Present and to Come! Being the strange prophecies and uncommon predictions of Mother Shipton* (London, 1797), *The Original Predictions of Robert Nixon, commonly called the Cheshire Prophet*, ed. J. Oldmixon (London: John Nicholson, 1800)

⁵³ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 343–4.

crafted to appeal to as wide an audience as possible; from the gossipy, vernacular tone and the exclamatory words emblazoned across their title pages ('extraordinary', 'wonderful', 'mysterious'), to the price (often as cheap as a penny – enabled by efficiencies in print manufacturing).⁵⁴ It is the historian's and the literary historicist's challenge to excavate this body of evidence and pick apart the rhetorical strategies and ironies that overlay the material evidence of popular magic practice. I propose to engage with that challenge below in the form of three case studies.

Case Study 1: Writing Cunning men

My first case study focuses on two biographical pamphlets. The first, *The Conjuror of Ruabon: The Life and Mysterious Transactions of John Roberts, known by the name of Mochyn-y-Nant, or the Pig of the Brook* – already noted above – is an 8-paged quarto, published anonymously in Ellesmere, a town in the Welsh Marches near Oswestry, Shropshire. The text is undated but, given the fact that the title page names John Roberts as 'lately deceased', it is likely to have been published close to his death in 1806. The penny pamphlet is adorned with a simple woodcut – similar to those used to front pre-Restoration chapbooks – of the conjuror in long robes. De Quincey recorded John Roberts's skill for casting nativities, but verse on the pamphlet's title page reveals the full range of services offered by Mochyn-y-Nant, identifying him as a cunning man, rather than an astrologer:

⁵⁴ Lemoine sold his biography of Richard Morris for an affordable 6 pence, while the Ellesmere pamphlet about Mochyn-Y-Nant cost only a penny.

By Magic Spells the Pig o' the Brook
The Village Pilferer oft took;
The Fortune of each Girl he knew,
And if her Swain were false or true;
He'd rule the Planets, too, they say,
And tell both Birth and Bridal Day . . .
Could Dreams expound or Lay a Ghost
In the Red Sea with Pharoah's [*sic*] Host:
Each Thought before him stood confess'd,
Which made Folks think he was possess'd.⁵⁵

He was called on not only to 'create love in the human breast, but chill it with aversion and disdain'; he also advertised his skill for ghost laying, and haunted houses were 'soon by his magic freed from their nocturnal visitors'.⁵⁶ The pamphlet also suggests that victims of petty crime turned to Roberts to act as a regulatory force. If a thief could not be immediately identified, Roberts would deploy curses as a means of supernatural retribution:

In cases of petty robbery, where he could not infallibly mark out the offender, he still was able to afflict him with any infirmity or disease the injured party should chuse . . . agues, rheumatisms, and St. Vitus's Dance [*chorea* – a

⁵⁵ *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 4.

disorder that causes involuntary movement] were entirely at his command, and dealt out by him in the most liberal manner.⁵⁷

This suggests that some aspects of Roberts's repertoire were closer to necromancy or malign witchcraft, and the author notes his reputation for being knowledgeable in 'what is called the Black Art' – a term that denotes the proximity of his practice to witchcraft. Roberts certainly appears to have had a scholarly interest in his craft. The written charms he sold to bring fortune in any 'rustic enterprize' – particularly in gaming – were 'couched in dark and hieroglyphic characters' and he professed 'great knowledge in the Occult Sciences' – though this may well have been part of Roberts's theatre, as witnessed by De Quincey.

There is an interesting disjunction between the sensationalist tone of the traditional chapbook form – written as if from within the supernatural episteme – and textual slippages that work to reveal the author's scepticism of Roberts's powers. For example, Roberts is said to have 'conducted [fortune-telling] with so much address and cunning, that those who consulted him were frequently *impressed with a strong conviction of the truth*'.⁵⁸ A similar underlying scepticism also gestures at Roberts's financial motivations for assisting members of his community, reporting that he 'gave (or rather sold) CHARMS' to those in need.⁵⁹ While the pamphlet offers an impressive list of Roberts's alleged talents, only one example of his actual practice is given in any detail – a 'laughable' anecdote regarding the recovery of a stolen diamond ring. In this

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 4 (*italics mine*).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

episode, however, Roberts did little more than take advantage of his client's generous hospitality (including an array of lavish meals on which the conjuror reportedly 'gorged', with a lack of grace that De Quincey's depiction also suggests). The guilty party – in this case, his client's footmen – were driven to confess their crime by Roberts's reputation only. The author demystifies the thieves' compulsion to reveal their guilt as having nothing to do with any exercise of supernatural power on the part of Roberts. When the conjuror, 'gorged' from his first of three splendid meals that he had agreed to accept as payment, exclaimed 'Tis well! I have the first!', an attendant footman (one of the thieves) 'trembled at the ambiguous words, and ran to his companions . . . "He has found us out, dear friends," he cried; "he is a cunning man; he said he had the first; what could he mean but me?"'. When fear of detection leads to the footmen's confession, Roberts is portrayed as being equally surprised by the outcome: "'Be prudent!" exclaimed the astonished magician, who little thought that what he had spoken of his meals, could have made the plunderers betray themselves'.⁶⁰ Nor are the talents to which Roberts laid claim represented in the pamphlet as exclusively his. By the end of the pamphlet the author notes that 'the credulous and superstitious will lament his loss till it is supplied by some "Brother of the trade" whose talents for imposition are equal to those he has so often to [his] advantage displayed'.⁶¹ I argue that these narrative disjunctions are by no means accidental; rather, they subtly guide the reader into a sceptical position regarding Roberts's claims to supernatural power. The pamphlet's readers are led from the tripping opening verse of the poem which, with its hybrid faux-pastoral, biblical,

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.7.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 8.

evangelical and balladic discourses, moves through Roberts's extensive list of claimed abilities, to a case study of an incident in which it is Roberts's reputation (rather than any demonstrated ability) that achieved the desired result. Finally, in the closing paragraph, the author makes direct reference to the conjuror's 'imposition' in the hope that his reader will have reached the same conclusion. *The Conjuror of Ruabon* thus emerges as an exercise in sceptical reading.

There is no doubting John Roberts's historicity. However, *The Conjuror of Ruabon* offers its reader very little in terms of specific data or evidence (names, locations, dates). Rather, the impact that Roberts's services had on the lives of people in his local community is registered in mostly generic terms by the sensationalist chapbook. In contrast, *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris, Esq. Better known by the name of Dick Spot the Conjuror*, offers a wealth of information to substantiate the text's numerous detailed sketches of the cunning man's successful endeavours. Written several years earlier in May 1798, and published in 1799, the pamphlet is far more substantial than *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, which is more like a traditional chapbook in format. *The Life and Mysterious Transactions* offers a profile of the life of the eminent conjuror Richard Morris, followed by a large and detailed collection of anecdotes profiling the services Morris offered in the course of his 'public practice as a predictor'.⁶² From the title page, the reader is afforded an insight into the range of services that Morris provided, which included 'Lost property restored – Life preserved – Robberies prevented – Deaths frequently foretold'.

⁶² *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, p, 23.

Unlike the distanced author of *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, who remains consistently anonymous and does not achieve dynamic identity as a narrative persona (beyond the subtle ironies noted above), the authorial voice of *The Life and Mystrious Transactions of Richard Morris* constitutes itself as a significant presence throughout the text, owing largely to the author's self-identification from the outset as 'an old acquaintance' of the conjuror and 'a critical observer of all his actions for near fifty years'. The word 'critical' here is significant; it identifies the author from the first as a rational commentator and alerts his readers to his own underlying scepticism of Morris's claims. The author asserts direct contact with Morris. For instance, in August 1790, a 'certain hopeful heir' came to Morris seeking his fortune. The heir asked Morris 'what does my mother think of me?' to which the cunning man answered 'she thinks you are the greatest rake alive; and I think you the greatest fool for many parts of your conduct'.⁶³ Unhappy with the fortune he had been read, the 'illustrious inquirer' halted the consultation. The author states: 'I have often heard Dick say since, that he believed his high born customer would never like or forget the lesson he carried away'.⁶⁴ Of course, many of the tales he relates – some of them dramatically (re)staging purported dialogues between Morris and his clients – are most likely fictionalised. However, there is evidence that substantiates the author's claims to a personal acquaintance with Morris – at least in the form of written correspondence. The pamphlet was published anonymously. However, the text affords clues that enable us to identify the author as London-based bookseller, editor and chapbook-writer Henry Lemoine. The pamphlet was published by his wife Anne

⁶³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

(though by this point they had separated), and the author reveals that around the time Lemoine was editing *The Conjuror's Magazine* in the early 1790s, Richard Morris had sent him a prediction for publication. Sure enough, Morris's prediction – that 'the KING of Sweden will be cruelly drowned' – can be found (in a slightly different form) in the December 1791 issue of the periodical.⁶⁵ This prediction has since been wrongly credited to William Gilbert (an astrologer and friend of Coleridge and Southey during their years in Bristol, whose influence will be traced throughout this thesis) – a misattribution that interestingly illustrates the blurring of occult practices (and of classes of occult practitioner) in the period.

We can only speculate as to why Lemoine chose a cunning man such as Richard Morris as the subject of this text in 1798. As noted, there is evidence that author and conjuror were acquainted, and thus the pamphlet may have been a tribute to a friend. A short biography of Richard Morris was included in an 'Obituary of Considerable Persons', published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of July 1792. There are similarities between the article and *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, particularly in the former's questioning 'whether a county conjuror is not of more service than a county gaol and a gallows'.⁶⁶ It is likely that Lemoine – a regular contributor to *The Gentleman's Magazine* – was also the author of this article. The publication of this obituary suggests that the pamphlet may have been intended as an extended memorial piece. Alternatively, it may simply have benefited Lemoine to encourage a belief in popular magic among his customers – he had, after all, been known to supplement his own earnings as a bookseller by peddling a cure-all known as

⁶⁵ *The Conjuror's Magazine* (December 1791).

⁶⁶ *The Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1792), p. 283.

'bug water'.⁶⁷ Popular magic may simply have appealed to Lemoine as a commercially viable subject that would appeal to a wide reading audience. Lemoine had begun the 1790s as editor of *The Conjuror's Magazine* – a fascinating astrological and occult miscellany that was deployed – as I will later demonstrate – as an important platform for ideological debate. The magazine marketed itself as an entertaining publication, intended for the 'glee, innocence and satisfaction' of families.⁶⁸ However, an exploration of its contents often reveals more robust political preoccupations and anxieties. On sale for an affordable sixpence, Lemoine's biography of 'Dick Spot' was a very different publication from his often scholarly occult periodical. The author's personal financial hardship may have accounted for this shift in focus. By July 1798, he had experienced a stint in debtor's prison and the collapse of his marriage, and had suffered a devastating blow to his literary reputation. Instead of attracting a narrow audience with a specialist interest in astrology or occult philosophy, Lemoine seems to have decided at the close of the decade to target a broader, popular and more financially lucrative readership with the 'Dick Spot' pamphlet. It is difficult to judge exactly how successful the publication was as a commercial venture. However, Lemoine was skilled at judging the tastes of the popular literary marketplace, and his decision to feature a cunning man as the focus of a text designed for mass-market consumption suggests the continued relevance and attraction of popular magic for a Romantic-period popular readership.

⁶⁷ For biographical information on Henry Lemoine see David Goldthorpe, 'Lemoine, Henry (1756–1812)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16430>> [Accessed 27 December 2015] and Roy Bearden-White, *How the Wind Sits How the Wind Sits; Or, The History of Henry and Ann Lemoine, Chapbook Writers and Publishers of the Late Eighteenth Century* (Michigan: ProQuest, 2008).

⁶⁸ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (August 1791), p. 10.

Locating the text generically is a challenge. It functions as obituary (the text appeared five years after Morris's death), cultural history, sensationalised entertainment, and as a defence of Morris and of the cunning man's craft more generally. For the historian, the pamphlet is a rich source of information concerning the day-to-day practices of cunning folk, while the underlying ironies throughout the text offer a fascinating example of the complexities of contemporary literary responses to individuals such as Morris.

I argue that, in *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, Lemoine adopts the guise of a credulous, gossipy persona – a superstitious narrator – in order to attune his work to, and parody, the popular chapbook form. The pamphlet opens with a biographical account of Morris's childhood and the early development of his 'habit of fortune-telling'.⁶⁹ The narrative tone of these anecdotes is colloquial and familiar, mirroring the cultures of circulating hearsay within which the cunning man operated, and is complimentary to the point of over-dramatic sycophancy. 'That some supernatural agency of spiritual inspiration was the peculiar gift of Mr. Morris's, the narrator exclaims, 'none who knew him can deny'.⁷⁰ Claiming that since 'Mr Morris's actions being upon a better foundation of credit than usually such relations stand on, whoever attempts to ridicule them, will, instead of turning them into jest, become the object of ridicule themselves', Lemoine (by means of his credulous narrator) invites his readers to challenge the evidence offered in the biographical account.⁷¹ The reader is presented with a series of wild claims, founded on little substantial evidence. The

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 8.

conjuror's abilities, the narrator claims, could be 'attested by many respectable witnesses, both in town and country; proving, that every thing belonging to the history of this wonderful man, was beyond the settled rules by which human actions and the ways of man are in general regulated'.⁷² Morris, a man who 'seems to have been born to amuse the vulgar and puzzle the wise', was born in Bakewell, Derbyshire, in 1710.⁷³ Lemoine takes a sly swipe at the conjuror's character when revealing that no part of Morris's 'singular character' could be attributed to the respectable figures of his mother (a descendant of the 'greatest mechanic in the kingdom', Richard Arkwright) or father (a soldier who died before Morris's sixth year). Instead, Morris's character is traced back to the woman who raised him – his aunt, Deborah Heathcote.⁷⁴ Lemoine gestures at the illegitimacy of his aunt's means of income, awkwardly glossed by the authorial voice as respectable practice:

Mrs Heathcote, his aunt, who it has been observed, was independent in circumstances, contrived to better them, by advising the young, and amusing the aged, in various concerns of life. The truth is, she was a fortune-teller.⁷⁵

Of course, the legitimacy of the services Morris offered was as ambiguous as the 'crude' forms of magical practice offered by his aunt. The pamphlet portrays the young Morris as having received 'as good learning as [his aunt's] circumstances would

⁷² Ibid., p. 36.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

permit', though the precise nature of that education remains in question. Morris's divinatory abilities, however, are presented as 'intuitive knowledge' (in contrast to John Roberts's, who advertised his occult knowledge as the result of scholarly pursuit).⁷⁶ By the age of twelve, Morris is said to have surpassed his aunt in skill and reputation and would be consulted on various matters – 'the recovery of strayed cattle, stolen goods; and even . . . his opinion upon the probability of marriage between parties who were anxious for a happy union'.⁷⁷ However, in a move that demonstrates the consistently destabilising nature of the narrative, Morris is portrayed as having advanced beyond the crude 'fortune-telling' of his youth into more respectable and challenging occult modes of practice later in his career: 'Charms and spells and magical delusions, if they may so be called, (for the country folks had great faith in them) he had long left off dealing in'. However, the services offered in his later career, such as the 'notable cures, such as old inveterate agues, removed by burying three bits of paper sealed up', are still firmly located in the realms of superstition and popular magic. This strategy encouraged Lemoine's readers to question the nature, trajectory, telling and popular consumption of Morris's career.

On the surface, the biography of Richard Morris offers an idealised image of the conjuror as a respectable and successful man who served the best interests of his community. We are told that he was a landowner, 'lived in good credit', 'was charitable to the poor' and earned enough to keep a coach and liveried servants.⁷⁸ Morris was by no means secretive about his line of work; rather, Lemoine portrays the

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

practitioner as an active and respected figure. The prominence of the country conjuror as a judicial and regulatory force in the provinces (as useful as ‘the village attorney or the magistrate of the metropolis’, as we have seen),⁷⁹ for instance, resulted in Morris becoming part of local idiom: “‘I’ll go to Dick Spot,” was the usual tone with every one, young and old, who threatened others with seeking after redress for real or imaginary wrongs’.⁸⁰ I suggest, however, that Lemoine’s underlying agenda was to undermine the sensationalist portrait of the conjuror as champion of the disenfranchised lower-classes. On the front page of the octodecimo text, decorated with an illustration of one of the anecdotes given from Morris’s life, the extravagantly dressed conjuror is pictured bewitching an unsuspecting pedlar so that the latter destroys his own wares, to the leering delight of the inebriated patrons of his pub, The White Horse, in Frankwell, Shrewsbury (identifiable by the image on the pub sign) [fig. 2]. Here, the conjuror’s arts are reduced to mere spectacle –sordid, ad hoc entertainment for the benefit of the boorish, and at the expense of the rural poor – reflecting, in interesting ways, the pamphlet’s own status as object of spectacle. The discrepancies between the visual and textual elements of the pamphlet work to undermine the image of Morris as a benevolent community figure. The discerning reader is alerted to the ironies of the author’s project, and is encouraged to read the exaggerated and fantastical claims of the text sceptically. Clearly fascinated by Morris’s skill as a successful peddler of his own brand of occult services, Lemoine is careful to note the early emergence of the young boy’s shrewd business acumen: his aunt charged only half a crown to read fortunes, while ‘her nephew never opened his lips before the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

physician's fee was posted; i.e. a Guinea'.⁸¹ Readers are reminded of the financial implications of the conjuror's services throughout the text – a strategy that subtly reveals the commercial motives that underpinned Morris's practices. The conjuror, he reminds his readers, was a tradesman first and foremost. Lemoine is careful to lend the financially successful conjuror the title 'Richard Morris Esq.' – a mark of respectability, but also of difference between the affluent conjuror and the unquestioning, unfortunate and desperate individuals (chief sources of his income) who came to rely on him.

The pamphlet also offers a window onto the range clientele that the cunning man served. While most of his customer base were 'of the fair sex', the author notes that 'the curious querents were . . . various in their persons, age, quality, profession, art and trade'.⁸² Interestingly, at several points in the narrative, Morris is depicted as a socially levelling force in his community. While operating in Matlock, Derbyshire a poor community inhabited by quarry labourers, his 'propensity to serve the poorest person' was reportedly 'too visible to be overlooked'.⁸³ Meanwhile, he treated his more affluent customers with a degree of contempt. One of his upper-class clients, for instance, is said to have remarked that Morris 'paid less respect to her, and more to her servants, than he ought'. The conjuror's alleged reply – that he 'knew several chamber maids more genteel and well born as her, and many mistresses more awkward [*sic*] and lower bred than their maids' – constructs the cunning man as a class-conscious figure who firmly represented the interests of the lower orders and

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 21-2.

⁸³ Ibid.

who, at some level, perhaps, was invested in a disruption of the status quo.⁸⁴ Of course, it is difficult to distinguish how far this is Morris's or the author's agenda – but, while we do not know the exact nature of their relationship, it is highly unlikely that the author would have been present to witness the conversation between cunning man and client.

The closing pages of the pamphlet are dedicated to a series of 'Sleight of Hand Tricks' that were 'practiced by Dick Spot when a boy', such as changing the colour of a rose (by burning sulphur at its stem) or playing cup and balls without hands.⁸⁵ I suggest that Lemoine's inclusion of these 'physiological amusements' indicates, and further alerts his reader to, the underlying purpose of the text. The majority of this final section is lifted word-for-word from *Physical Amusements and Diverting Experiments* (1784) by the Italian-born stage magician Giuseppe ('Joseph') Pinetti – a text designed to instruct readers how to perform a range of amusing 'scientific experiments' as parlour tricks.⁸⁶ Pinetti's *Physical Amusements* was published only 9 years before Morris died at the age of 83; any connection between these amusements and the young Richard Morris is likely to have been entirely fabricated by Lemoine. Further, there is no mention of Morris practicing legerdemain in the detailed depiction that Lemoine gives of the conjuror's childhood and early career, offered earlier in the pamphlet. These feats of legerdemain are clearly identified (both by Pinetti and by Lemoine) as material illusion, (mere) boyish sleight-of-hand conjury very different from the practices of the cunning man's repertoire (reliant as the latter was at times

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 37–8.

⁸⁶ Giuseppe Pinetti, *Physical Amusements and Diverting Experiments* (London: 1784).

on sleight-of-hand). These parlour tricks, extracted from a text that worked to demystify sharpers' and stage magicians' illusions, create a disjunctive dynamic, alerting the reader to the complexities of the author's engagement with Morris. Lemoine performs a complete evacuation of his subject's supernatural ability in the course of unveiling of these magic tricks. This sudden narrative/structural swerve invites the reader to reassess the material they have encountered throughout the course of the pamphlet and reconsider the claims made by Morris himself.

Reading the pamphlet in the context of Lemoine's earlier work on *The Conjuror's Magazine* (profiled in detail as a case study, below), I suggest that the author – despite his overt claims to the contrary – was sceptical of the conjuror. The portrayal of Morris as a charitable and benevolent hero of the poorest communities is problematic. After all, the fees he extracted from desperate individuals for his services are what contributed to his own substantial personal wealth. Morris's destruction of the pedlar's wares for no more edifying a reason than the amusement of his drunken patrons similarly makes for uncomfortable reading. Meanwhile, Lemoine makes hyperbolic claims regarding the young Morris's intelligence – comparing him to the famous sixteenth-century Scottish polymath, James Crichton, who 'so much spoken of for his premature genius, would diminish by comparison' – and suggests that '[no] biographer, since the time of Plutarch, [has] recorded such an astonishing character as that I am about to lay before the public'.⁸⁷ I suggest that Lemoine playfully motions to the virtues of sceptical reading as a ludic challenge to his more perceptive readers – that portion of his audience, that is, that would have read *The Conjuror's Magazine*:

⁸⁷ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, p. 6.

Incredulity in matters of fact is but prudence, when the relation comes from questionable authors, who chiefly aim at the sale of their books, or at gaining the admiration of the vulgar by surprising stories: but how astonishing soever a relation may be, if it be confirmed by several hands, and especially by discerning men and eye witnesses, we ought rather, at least, only suspend our judgement, than reject the circumstance upon the head of impossibility.⁸⁸

Lemoine playfully identifies himself as one of the ‘questionable authors’, reliant on ‘vulgar’ sensationalism in order to negotiate the market. While any attempt to identify Lemoine’s intentions can only be speculative, I argue that certain strategies in his text are usefully seen as an extension – adapted to a very different genre – of his radical agenda earlier in the decade in *The Conjuror’s Magazine* to encourage always a sceptical parsing of evidence. Lemoine’s account of Richard Morris is fraught with the same internal ironies that are present in his periodical. Like the provoking editorial taunts that Lemoine inserted to goad contributors to *The Conjuror’s Magazine* – taunts that questioned the legitimacy of their craft and pitted rivals against each other – the ironies and disjunctive, patchwork effects of the Dick Spot pamphlet challenge the more discerning reader to detect, if not the economic and psychological needs, then at least the illusion, behind the magic.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

Case Study 2: Didacticism – Educating Readers out of Superstition

My second case study focuses on three instructional pieces, intended to educate their audiences out of a belief in and reliance on superstition. While Lemoine and the author of *The Conjuror of Ruabon* may have been sceptical of their subjects' claims to supernatural power, they do not appear to have regarded cunning folk as a social threat. Indeed, they are likely to have believed the claim that a cunning man served a regulatory function, generating salutary anxiety regarding surveillance and retribution that maintained social and judicial equilibrium. Other authors, meanwhile, felt a need to publish didactic texts warning against the dangers of superstition, indicating that a continuing reliance on cultures of popular magic was certainly considered to be potentially damaging – particularly for those individuals such as the uneducated and the labouring classes in rural or provincial areas who were regarded as susceptible to the 'deceptions' of cunning folk. The texts on which I focus in this case study construct magical practitioners as obnoxious criminals and manipulative fraudsters: Hannah More's 1797 tract, *Tawney Rachel the Fortune-Teller*, and two pamphlets that focus on the trial of notorious cunning woman Mary Bateman, whose deceptions led to her arrest and execution in 1809, which return us to the territory of the witch.

William St Clair notes that when, in 1785, Hannah More and her sister set up a school in Somerset, they were horrified to discover the 'mentalities, beliefs and "folk" superstitions of the agricultural workers and rural poor'.⁸⁹ The conservative More was particularly concerned to provide what she considered 'suitable' reading material for these little-educated and (as she believed) morally and spiritually vulnerable

⁸⁹ St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 352.

audiences. She identified clear and present danger in the pre-Restoration chapbooks that continued to be published into the Romantic period alongside the Jacobin politics of the French Revolution that circulated in the form of cheap radical political pamphlets such as Paine's *Rights of Man*. As More wrote in a letter to Zachary Macaulay in 1796, while 'vile and indecent penny books' continued to be a matter of grave concern, the 'speculative infidelity' that had been 'bought down to the pockets and capacities of the poor' was particularly dangerous.⁹⁰ 'Those who teach the poor to read', she wrote in 1799, 'should not only take care to furnish them with principles which will lead them to abhor corrupt books, but should also furnish them with such books as shall strengthen and confirm their principles'.⁹¹ In response, More wrote her *Cheap Repository Tracts* – a range of didactic texts, financially backed by wealthy subscribers, whose distribution would 'drive out both the old chapbooks and the radical pamphlets'.⁹² These pamphlets were hawked at a price that frequently undercut traditional chapbooks, and were distributed for free in hospitals, workhouses, prisons and military barracks (though it is of course impossible to determine how widely the tracts were actually read – or indeed how they were read – by the individuals within these institutions).⁹³

The story of Tawney Rachel – one of More's repository tracts – was initially published in April 1797. The 16-page pamphlet depicts the deceptions of the wife of

⁹⁰ Quoted in G. H. Spinney, 'Cheap Repository Tracts, Hazard and Marshall Edition', *The Library*, vol. xx (1940), p. 296.

⁹¹ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, vol. I. (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1799), pp. 172-3.

⁹² St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 352.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 354. The title page of 'Tawney Rachel' advertises the cost of the pamphlet as 'one-penny, or six-shillings per hundred' - illustrating the commercial targets of the tract, and the distribution methods that More deployed.

Black Giles the Poacher (the subject of two further tracts by More published in the same year), who tricked vulnerable and superstitious members of her community out of money – particularly ‘silly girls’ and ‘harmless maids’.⁹⁴ More’s identification of Tawney Rachel as ‘vermin’ implies the scale of the continued reach and prominence of such practitioners in some areas of the country. The text reveals the secular mechanics behind Rachel’s supposedly ‘supernatural’ powers, acting as a warning to those who might otherwise be beguiled by the theatrical illusions of such fraudsters. Those such as Rachel who claim magical and divinatory powers are clearly identified by More as criminals, and their superstitious client-victims are equally responsible for enabling and perpetuating their underhand business by failing to recognise and reform their own credulity.

Despite being depicted by More as a fortune-teller or gypsy (for whom ‘Tawn[e]y’ was frequently used as a derogatory term), a practitioner touting Rachel’s range of magical services – dream interpretation, the casting of love charms and the discovery of buried treasure – is likely to have been identified at the time as a cunning woman. The profusion of occult terminology in More’s tale illustrates the conflation of different practices and identities in the public mind. More declares that

I have thought it my duty to print this little history as a kind warning to all you young men and maidens not to have anything to say to CHEATS, IMPOSTORS,

⁹⁴ Hannah More, *Tales for the Common People and Other Cheap Repository Tracts* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2002), p. 87.

CUNNING WOMEN, FORTUNE-TELLERS, CONJURERS, AND INTERPRETERS OF
DREAMS.⁹⁵

Rachel is also referred to as an 'old hag' who practised the 'black art' – indicating her connections to witchcraft. The nuances separating the *métiers* of contemporary practitioners of popular magic – nuances they often jealously sought to define and guard – were not necessarily recognised by their customers and by the readers of such tracts as More's.

Unlike Richard Morris and John Roberts, Tawney Rachel's precise historicity is doubtful. She is a type – central to instructional literature, of course – rather than an individual. However, the figure of Rachel is likely to have been constructed from More's own observations and circulating tales and rumours of practising cunning folk, fortune-tellers and charlatans. Certainly, the detail in which More profiles Rachel, her family and her victims insists on a historical base. Rachel's activities are located by More in the West Country – owing, most likely, to More's exposure to the continuing popular reliance on such figures during her own time in Somerset. Rachel is said to have operated in the Taunton area, at some distance from her home. In *Black Giles the Poacher* (1796) – a pamphlet detailing the deceptions of Rachel's husband – the family's 'hovel' is said to have been located 'on the borders of one of those great moors in Somersetshire', that 'mud cottage with the broken windows stuffed with dirty rags, just beyond the gate which divides the upper from the lower moor'.⁹⁶ While

⁹⁵ More, *Tales for the Common People*, p. 94.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

that geographical coordinate rather argues against the depiction of Rachel as a vagrant gypsy, More still describes her work as a fortune-teller as an 'unlawful means to support a vagabond life'.⁹⁷ Following the change in the legal status of witchcraft, vagrancy was one of the charges used most often to detain magical practitioners.⁹⁸ The relationship between magical practitioners and vagrancy, however, is difficult to determine. While some practitioners operated from their own properties, others seem to have offered a more itinerant service – travelling into towns to catch passing trade on busy market days, or even visiting their clients' homes. Itinerancy was regarded with suspicion. Beggars were a particular concern in the context of intrusions into private space, which interestingly connects with vexed issues of charity and social responsibility, and the political climate of the 1790s increased reactionary distrust of all that was unfixed. That gypsies and fortune-tellers were typically regarded as vagrant strangers who moved, unregulated, through social space suggests that they were unlikely to attain the same measure of respect accorded to the settled cunning man, who was more emphatically embedded (albeit in highly ambiguous ways) in his community. For More, the charge of vagrancy appears to characterise Rachel's existence outside of orthodox systems of control and regulation.

It is perhaps not surprising that in her evangelical text, More fails satisfactorily to engage with the social conditions that forced women like Tawney Rachel to adopt an occult identity. As I will argue, the role of occult practitioner – whether in the form of 'legitimate' cunning person, or even witch – offered a measure of enfranchisement and self-definition (even status) to individuals who had few other means of self-

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁹⁸ See Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 23.

actualisation and financial security. In *Black Giles the Poacher*, More indicates that the Giles family live in a dilapidated cottage. However, rather than identifying poverty as the motivation behind being forced into practices such as fortune-telling, More perceives their seemingly impoverished status as merely another fabricated theatrical attempt to extract charity from their community. More suggests that 'you may know [their] house at a good distance by the ragged tiles on the roof, and the loose stones which are ready to drop out from the chimney; though a short ladder, a hod of mortar and half an hour of leisure time would have prevented all this'.⁹⁹ However, as More suggests, Giles 'fell into that common mistake, that a beggarly-looking cottage, and filthy-ragged children, raised most compassion, and of course drew most charity'.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, while the Giles family may have shown cunning in their various exploits, More is keen to highlight that Giles 'was out of his reckoning here; for it is neatness, housewifery, and a decent appearance, which draws the kindness of the rich and charitable . . . not out of pride, but because they see that it is next to impossible to mend the condition of those who degrade themselves by dirt and sloth'.¹⁰¹ However, while More condemns the criminal activities of Rachel and her husband, no alternative is offered, other than reliance on the benevolence of more fortunate individuals – problematically placing disenfranchised individuals in a position of reliance on the paternalistic systems that More's text idealised. It often benefited beggars to embrace their reputations as individuals capable of acts of *maleficium*; 'few people really wanted to give charity to a witch', Owen Davies notes, 'and the only way they could be

⁹⁹ More, *Tales for the Common People*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

persuaded to do so was through the implied threat of reprisal by witchcraft'.¹⁰² In *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman* (1809), for instance (a text we will turn to in more detail shortly), we read that Bateman 'had got from her [client] several sums of money for the purpose of curing her of an "evil wish", laid upon her by an old beggar woman whom she had refused to relieve'.¹⁰³ The sensationalism of Bateman's crimes elides the substantive problem – a social and economic system that forced women (including Bateman herself) to adopt occult identities in order to fend off poverty. Popular magic offered certain members of the community an income and a social identity within a patriarchal society that had failed to succour them.

Hannah More's Rachel uses theatricality and sensationalism to convince her clients of her power. When she offers to read the fortune of the superstitious Mrs Jenkins, for instance, she first 'looked about very carefully, and shutting the door with a mysterious air, asked if [Jenkins] were sure nobody would hear them' – a display of sensationalist intrigue that was 'at once delightful and terrifying' to her credulous client. This degree of secrecy, of course, would have a secondary function in concealing her criminal activity and deceptions. For instance, by telling Mrs Jenkins that the spell for locating hidden treasure would be ruined if she entered the cellar, where the charm (consisting of 5 guineas placed in a basin to the accompaniment of Rachel's 'barbarous words') had been secreted, More's Rachel gives herself enough time to escape detection before Jenkins's husband discovers that the money has actually been replaced by pieces of tin. More's fortune-teller is depicted as practising a secondary profession, in this case as a pedlar and ballad seller/singer. She 'pretended

¹⁰² Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, pp.177.

¹⁰³ *The Extraordinary Life of Mary Bateman*, p. 19.

to get her bread by selling laces, cabbage nets, ballads, and history books, and used to buy old rags and rabbit skins'.¹⁰⁴ A shabbily-dressed Rachel attracting the attention of a young woman (and potential client) by means of the various ballads that are seen spilling out of her basket is depicted in the woodcut that fronts the pamphlet [fig. 3]. Rachel's alternative employment is by no means presented as an economic prop. Rather, while More is quick to highlight that 'many honest people trade in these things' (an important distinction to make, given that More herself would rely on balladeers and chapmen to circulate her repository tracts), we are told that 'Rachel only made this traffic a pretence for getting admittance into farmers' kitchens, in order to tell fortunes'.¹⁰⁵ 'She had not, to be sure, the power of really foretelling things, because she had no power of seeing into futurity', More remarks, in laboured fashion, for her audience; however, she notes that Rachel 'had the art sometimes to bring [events] about according as she had foretold them. So she got that credit for her wisdom which really belonged to her wickedness'. Rachel's fortune-telling was nothing more than one of the unlawful strategies employed by the Giles family (and, by extension, all magical practitioners) to 'maintain themselves by tricks and pilfering' as 'regular labour and honest industry did not suit their idle habits'.¹⁰⁶

Identifying the target audience for More's didactic warnings against the claims of cunning folk allows us to ascertain the social groups considered most at risk from their perceived deceit. Perhaps the best indication of More's target audience is the fact that her tracts closely resembled the chapbooks they sought to replace. In line

¹⁰⁴ More, *Tales for the Common People*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

with pamphlets such as *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris* and *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, More's texts carried traditional woodcuts, and the vernacular language is accessible – indicating that they were intended for a similar audience. More also alludes to what she believes to be a direct connection between popular literature and the continued reliance on popular magic. One of Rachel's 'secondary professions' is selling ballads full of 'loose words'. In the woodcut illustration, Rachel's basket depicts some of the wares she peddled – in particular a collection of 'slip ballads', a form of literature that More considered to be particularly morally dangerous.¹⁰⁷ The credulous young labouring girl, Sally Evans, is depicted (both in the woodcut and in the body of the text) 'rummag[ing] the basket for those songs which had the most tragical pictures' – identifying herself as she does so as the perfect target for the fortune-teller's deceptions.¹⁰⁸ This indicates that those who consumed sensationalist popular literature were the ones who would also be most susceptible to the claims of cunning folk – and would thus benefit from More's own cheap brand of instruction. More depicts herself as an evangelical champion of the moral lives of the labouring classes, imploring her readers to 'listen to me, your true friend when I assure you that God never reveals to weak and wicked women those secret designs of his providence'.¹⁰⁹ She also assigns the blame for the continued belief in fortune-tellers to their victims – assuring her readers (those who may otherwise be tempted to consult women such as Tawney Rachel) that 'to consult these false oracles is not only

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 167, n. 8.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 94

foolish, but sinful . . . because it is prying into that futurity which God in mercy as well as wisdom, hides from men'.¹¹⁰

More's concerns about labouring-class superstition and the resilience of popular investment in occult practice are clearly related to political anxieties regarding the bewitching influence of radical popular literature, as I shall argue in Chapter 2. As Julia Saunders has argued in her reassessment of More's tracts as a potential vehicle for female liberation,

Her intention was to allow her readers to examine their own beliefs by comparing their experience to that on the printed page; the story leads them through the process of freeing themselves from superstition and irrational fears; in the eighteenth-century tradition of an enlightened education, More educates them out of their prejudices.¹¹¹

Citing conclusions drawn in the work of Susan Pedersen and Natalie Zemon Davies, Owen Davies suggests that, while enormously successful in terms of sales, More's tracts did not effectively fulfil her intentions: 'reformist works like Tawney Rachel failed to "educate" because the "superstitious" content of the narrative swamped the moral within'.¹¹² Crucially, More's condemnation of Rachel as a 'witch' is a strategy

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Julia Saunders 'Putting the Reader Right: Reassessing Hannah More's Cheap Repository Tracts', *Romanticism on the Net* (1999) < <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005881ar> > [accessed 22.07.2015].

¹¹² Susan Pedersen, 'Hannah More Meets Simple Simon: Tracts, Chapbooks, and Popular Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), pp. 84–113; Natalie Zemon Davies, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 160.

that, in falling back on terminology that is itself uncritically bound up in superstition, undermines her own enlightenment project. Depicting Rachel as 'witch' rather than 'fraud', More herself fails to establish an alternative rationalist vocabulary and thus an alternative world-view. Further, while More depicts throughout the dangers of chapbooks and ballads, her own tract was, in practice, another pamphlet, circulated by the very ballad-sellers and chapmen in whose guise Rachel herself appears in the woodcut in *Tawney Rachel*. Thus the woodcut is a fascinatingly recursive image that brings the morally improving text of *Tawney Rachel* into a problematic relationship with Rachel the witch/fortune-teller. Further, the attraction of a tract such as *Tawney Rachel* relies on the sensationalist curiosity of its audience concerning the text's central subject, who is only partially demystified by More's warnings. Unable to find an alternative form, More was reliant on the very same tactics of theatricality and sensationalism that Rachel used when attracting her clients by singing her 'enticing' ballad-songs. Ironically, More's text becomes one of the 'wicked ballads' in the complex cornucopia of Tawney Rachel's basket.¹¹³

Like More's *Cheap Repository Tracts, The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman the Yorkshire Witch* (1809), a pamphlet printed and sold in Leeds, depicts magical practitioners as criminals. Unlike More's Rachel, however, Bateman was a historical figure, the most notorious cunning woman of the period; of her exploits is to be found in various contemporary pamphlets and newspaper reports. Bateman operated on a scale different from More's Tawney Rachel, who was an opportunistic petty criminal, 'too prudent ever to go twice to the same house'.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ More, *Tales for the Common People*, p. 94.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Once she had attained her money, Rachel would quickly escape to avoid detection. Bateman, meanwhile, is depicted in the 1809 pamphlet as relentlessly predatory – repeatedly targeting the same individuals and continuing to deceive them for as long as money or possessions could be extracted from them. Her crimes are far more serious, ranging from outright theft (often completely unrelated to her magical trade) to homicide. Mrs Giles, one of Bateman’s gullible victims, was reportedly driven to financial ruin and even attempted suicide after paying hefty fees to have the malicious forces that were ranged against her ‘screwed down’ (in Bateman’s own phrase). Rebecca Perigo’s mysterious illness led her to seek Bateman’s services as a magical healer. However, Bateman had secretly been plying her with poison in order to perpetuate her symptoms and thereby extend her own employment. Bateman was found guilty of murder and hanged on 20 March 1809.

Occult terminology proliferates in the pamphlet. Bateman is referred to as a ‘fortune-teller’, ‘wise-woman’ and ‘The Yorkshire Witch’, while the services she offered to her clients – ranging from prognostication and love charms to unhexing – would have confirmed her identity as a cunning woman. The pamphlet, a more uniform narrative than that offered by Lemoine and by the anonymous author of *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, demystifies the techniques Bateman employed to carry out her ‘artifices, frauds and impositions’ – from distracting legerdemain to keeping abreast of circulating local gossip, which would be used theatrically to amaze her clients at the appropriate time. In Bateman’s case, the illegitimacy and criminality of the magical trade is underscored by her use of a series of pseudonyms such as ‘Mrs Moore’ and ‘Mrs Blythe’. Seeking further to identify Bateman as a fraudster by dissecting and

demystifying the multiple layers of her deceptions, the author notes that instead of claiming supernatural powers herself, she told her unsuspecting clients that she merely acted as a messenger for a series of cunning women who, according to the author, 'had no existence but in the artful mind and lying mouth of Mrs. Bateman'.¹¹⁵ These individuals, she claimed, were able to look into the future and predict terrible misfortunes for her victims. The only way to avoid the devastating incidents foretold would be through laying a series of protective charms – which Bateman's (fictional) associates could provide for a handsome fee. Mrs Greenwood, for instance, was informed that her absent husband would be detained and killed for committing an undisclosed offence before the next morning if 'four pieces of gold, four pieces of leather, four pieces of blotting paper and four brass screws were not produced that night, and placed in her hands to give to Mrs. Moore to "screw down" the guards' who were going to capture and detain her husband. With dry irony (a strategy that serves further to emphasise the ludicrousness of such beliefs) the author exclaims: 'This charm failed, as the officers were too much for the witch'.¹¹⁶

The opening pages of the text establishes the author's intentions: to become part of 'the province of history, to impartially record the actions of man and nations, with a view to the instruction of posterity'.¹¹⁷ Here, the 'province of history' seems also to be the demystifying corrective to the province of magic. In giving an account of Bateman's life and the criminal deceptions she practised, the anonymous author of the Leeds pamphlet registered the hope that

¹¹⁵ *Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman*, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

If this book should fall into the hands of any who entertain this ridiculous notion [i.e. a belief in witchcraft], the narrative of crimes it exhibits, and the dreadful consequences of those crimes, both to the deceiver and the deceived, will correct their dangerous error.¹¹⁸

Like Hannah More's tracts, the pamphlet presents itself as a warning to young women who 'are perhaps of all other persons the most subject to become the dupes of fortune-tellers', and particularly to 'servant maids' who are 'generally found amongst the front ranks, pressing forward to take a peep into futurity'. They are counselled to 'shun the practice and detest the deceptive art of fortune-tellers'.¹¹⁹ The pamphlet's principal aim was to educate its readers out of their superstitious beliefs, and to expose the deceptions of homicidal fraudsters such as Bateman.¹²⁰ This appears all the more urgent given that the pamphlet's immediate audience, we are told, were those from the 'humbler walks of life' in the Leeds-based communities that had been exposed to Bateman's arts.¹²¹ The suggestion is that Bateman and other magical practitioners thrived due largely to the naivety of their victims. 'Credulity and vice were Mary's best friends', the author states; and while Bateman may have been the source of the deceit, responsibility for the perpetuation of superstitious belief lies with those who are duped by her claims. The 1809 pamphlet is thus aligned with one of the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.18.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

main messages of Hannah More's tracts. If widespread reliance on superstition continued unchecked, practitioners of popular magic would only grow in number and influence. Bateman, the author concludes, had consulted fortune-tellers in her youth, but had seen through their deceptions and decided to employ them herself: 'such are the deceptive graduations of fraud and falsehood, first we countenance the practice of them in others, and then we are prepared to practise them ourselves'.¹²²

The polyvocal literary form of *The Extraordinary Life* is less easily recognisable as a traditional chapbook than More's tract. The first 27 of the pamphlet's 36 pages provide a narrative of Bateman's livelihood and criminal activities, all voiced with a cutting incredulity in order to demystify her deceptions. For instance, the author ironically observes that Bateman 'could on all occasions foretell the fortune of another; but could by no means perceive the dark and lowering cloud suspended above her own head'.¹²³ This biographical profile is followed by trial papers, including a number of extracts from letters sent to Perigo's husband by Bateman's alter-ego, Mrs Blythe, and transcripts of witness statements, which were likely included to promote the authority of the piece. The sober and more formal account of Bateman's trial includes very little reference to the supernatural, in line with the post-1735 secularisation of legal discourse. However, Bateman's depiction as the 'Yorkshire Witch' – a moniker that seems to reveal the didactic text's insertion in the very discourse – and thus world-view – it is seeking to reform. One might argue that the author may well have felt that the secular trial report alone would have failed to attract (and thus educate) a target audience susceptible to the deceptions of

¹²² Ibid., p. 8.

¹²³ Ibid., p.8.

individuals such as Bateman. Therefore, a familiar, even sensationalist, vernacular was required. However, I suggest that this pamphlet is not intended as a didactic, educational text in quite the same way as More's. While the labouring classes may have been depicted as being particularly prone to Bateman's deceptions, the sophisticated, satirical tone of the narrative, coupled with the inclusion of the formal trial papers, identify the pamphlet's intended audience to be different from More's target readership. That the author felt that it was necessary to publish a didactic text aimed at this audience indicates that the influence of fraudulent magical practitioners was not limited to the lower classes.

1809 also saw the publication, in London, of a pamphlet entitled *The Wonderful Life and Remarkable Trial of Mary Bateman*. This pamphlet may have shared the same subject as *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman the Yorkshire Witch*, but its tone and intentions substantially differ. The London text adopts a more traditional chapbook style, opening with a colourful frontispiece depicting Bateman (alongside a male accomplice – possibly her husband, whose complicity in her crimes the text also reveals) in the act of mixing her poison, while a body hanging from a gibbet can be seen through the window, foreshadowing Bateman's own execution. [fig. 4]. Coupled with eye-catching sensationalist buzzwords ('Witchcraft, Murder, Sorcery'), such visual rhetoric was designed to compete for attention in the crowded London popular reading market. Again, the text dismisses claims that cunning folk had any true supernatural ability. Bateman was 'visited by a great number of country people that were afflicted with various complaints' and, as in *Tawney Rachel* and the *Extraordinary Life* pamphlet, credulous young women of the

lower orders are identified as Bateman's targets: 'girls wanting husbands . . . were some of her best customers'.¹²⁴ However, *The Wonderful Life* has a dual agenda. What begins as an attack specifically on Bateman becomes an alarmist attack on occult practice more generally. Throughout the pamphlet, Bateman is linked with a range of well-known occult figures – from Swedenborg to Richard Brothers. The author (Mr Vincent – an attorney who claimed to have been present at Bateman's execution, though notably, not at the trial) – even goes so far as to allude to mesmerism, despite admitting that there was no evidence that Bateman had ever professed any knowledge of animal magnetism.¹²⁵ Again, the fluidity of occult practices is evinced in this text as the author manipulates points of contact between popular magic, practices such as mesmerism and prophecy to suit his own agenda. Bateman (if Vincent is to be believed) was 'a preacher in the principals of the prophecies of Joanna Southcott'.¹²⁶ Fascinatingly, Bateman's loyalty to Southcott is given centre-stage, and Southcott's name is even emblazoned in large print across the pamphlet's title page. Vincent claims that Bateman made a profit from selling protective seals similar to those that Southcott distributed to her followers, that 'letters were continuously passing from her to Southcote [*sic*], at Lambeth, near London', and that 'the prophetess had not a more industrious servant'.¹²⁷ Southcott, meanwhile, vehemently denied any connection to the Bateman.¹²⁸ At first glance it would appear that

¹²⁴ *The Wonderful Life and Trial of Mary Bateman*, p. 11.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²⁶ The Leeds pamphlet briefly mentions Bateman seeking Southcott's supporters in York as she believed that they would be easy to deceive for her own means, but this remains a short aside and there is certainly no indication that Bateman had any loyalty or interest in Southcott or her teachings beyond this.

¹²⁷ *The Wonderful Life and Trial of Mary Bateman*, p. 11.

¹²⁸ Joanna Southcott, 'A True Picture of the world, and a Looking Glass for All Men', *Life and Works: A Collection of Pamphlets*, Volume 6 (London: Galabin & Marchant, 1809), pp. 10–12.

Vincent's inclusion of Southcott may simply have been an attempt to appeal to a metropolitan readership who would have been familiar with the prophetess's works. However, that Vincent chooses to undermine Southcott by emphasising the supposed proximity between her prophecies and the nefarious deceptions of a false magical practitioner, highlights the fact that popular magic continued to carry the stigma of illegitimacy, despite the often central roles cunning folk played in their local communities. Of course, in doing so, Vincent also reveals that he is aware of Southcott's own past as a practising cunning woman, and that he is keen to undermine her later career as prophet by construing a link between popular magic and millenarian prophecy, a Mary Bateman and a Joanna Southcott.

A common theme across all three of the didactic texts in this case study is that the negative depictions of cunning folk and 'witches' focus resolutely on women, while the more celebratory, if at times ironic, texts in my first case study were dedicated to male practitioners. While cunning men earned a degree of respect within their communities, their female counterparts – despite offering the same services – were more likely to be regarded as illegitimate and perceived as beggars, vagrants or witches. This is evident on examining the gendered hierarchy of occult terminology. While male practitioners were more typically known by the somewhat more respectable titles of 'cunning man' or 'conjurer' (the latter a term that appears not to have been in the context of female practitioners), the more pejorative terms 'fortune-teller' or 'gypsy' appear to have been largely applied to women – regardless of the range of services they offered. Further, Owen Davies indicates that a much larger proportion of those accused of practising witchcraft in the period were women. In

Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, Davies suggests that accusations of witchcraft were less common in urban centres where the boundaries between private and public space were more stringently defined.¹²⁹ The majority of cases of bewitching involved tensions between women and other female neighbours:

It is understandable that when the butter failed to come, the pig would not eat its food, or a child fell ill, the witch would be sought among those they generally came into contact with in the daily round – in other words, women'.¹³⁰

Accusations between men were rarer, owing to the public communal and commercial spaces that male roles tended to inhabit.

The relationship between accusations of witchcraft and social vectors is compellingly mapped by Davies in terms of animal bewitchment. Sheep, who spent the majority of their time in fields away from the homestead, were rarely victims of witchcraft. The more likely targets would be cows, pigs and horses – animals that were kept in the immediate vicinity of the home and which, 'in terms of living environment, psychological attachment and economic importance . . . were integral elements of the family unit'.¹³¹ Defences against witchcraft often involved maintaining personal

¹²⁹ It is difficult to identify a specific historical period of reference in Davies' research on witchcraft, owing, largely, to the paucity of existing textual evidence regarding these mundane matters – particularly among the lower orders and in rural areas. However, the time-frame of Davies' study (1736–1951) identifies that his research is relevant to the post-1735 Witchcraft Act period and beyond.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 207-212.

boundaries (it is not surprising that many protective charms were found secreted in doorways).¹³² This gendering of occult practice is particularly interesting when considered in the context of *Lyrical Ballads*, as all of Wordsworth's disenfranchised 'occult' individuals in the volume are women, while Davies's spatial conceptualisation of popular magic provides a lens through which I propose in this thesis to re-read issues of space in poems such as Wordsworth's 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' – a poem that is actively engaged in the mapping of transgressed boundaries, and in which the bodily event of Harry Gill's curse symbolises and interiorises Goody Blake's physical trespass. If a cunning person was consulted by a client of a different locality, vague directives were usually given to identify the ill-wisher (such as revealing that the malevolent agent would be the first person with whom the client would come into contact on their return home). This, Davies notes, problematically led to damaging accusations between neighbours and everyday acquaintances.¹³³ Many victims would have prior suspicions, and the identification of a witch by scrying led clients to indulge their already deep-seated prejudices. The archetypal representation of the witch as a haggard old woman perpetuated social tensions and marginalisation. In many respects, a continuing fear of witchcraft throughout the Romantic period is indicative of the cultural force that cunning folk had in their communities. As I will show in Chapter 5, this damaging suspicion and accusation would inform Robert Southey's representation of the role of superstition in further ensnaring credulous individuals in despotic systems of control, perpetuated by those who stood to benefit from maintaining a culture of fear.

¹³² For examples of this see Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 150-151 and Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 109.

¹³³ Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 218.

Case Study 3: Starry Sedition and *The Conjuror's Magazine*

To date, *The Conjuror's Magazine* has received little scholarly attention. Patrick Curry was one of the first to highlight the importance of the publication in his book *Prophecy and Power* (1989). Curry notes the unstable identity of the magazine, an 'extravagant *mélange* of horoscopic interpretation, occult philosophy, physiognomy, mesmerism and Nostradamus'.¹³⁴ However, his real interest was limited to the articulation of the magazine's independence from a Newtonian orthodoxy. Curry's suggestion that popular astrology had been depoliticised during the late-eighteenth century fails to recognise the political implications of the deliberate ambiguities present within *The Conjuror's Magazine*.¹³⁵

In 2009, Paul Cheshire expanded on Curry's claims by offering a detailed, politicised reading of the periodical. Cheshire's website, dedicated to the astrologer William Gilbert, features a profile of *The Conjuror's Magazine*, introducing it as the forum that allowed Gilbert to launch his writing career before going on to write his best-known work, the theosophical poem *The Hurricane* (1796). Cheshire outlines Gilbert's role as a contributor to the magazine, and the reception of his radical politics, positioning him as 'part of the millennial occult underground that believed the French Revolution was a sign of the imminence of God's kingdom on earth'.¹³⁶ As one of the more inflammatory contributors – daring to publish nativities for resonant political figures such as William Pitt and the King of France – Cheshire casts Gilbert as a casualty of *The Conjuror's Magazine's* change of political loyalties. His introduction to

¹³⁴ Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 130.

¹³⁵ Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 115.

¹³⁶ Paul Cheshire, *An Introduction to William Gilbert (1763–1825?)* (2009), <<http://www.williamgilbert.com/biography.htm>> [accessed 12 June 2012] (para. 16 of 20).

the magazine challenges the editorial promise of ‘the glee, innocence and satisfaction, [with which] families, purchasers of this Magazine, will be enabled to pass the ensuing Winter evenings’.¹³⁷ Cheshire equips scholars with the tools to perform a radical reading of the magazine, suggesting that ‘if it started out as fun for all the family, its pages definitely did grow to cater for the family’s wild rebellious son’.¹³⁸

Expanding on Cheshire’s work, Maria Schuchard also uses *The Conjuror’s Magazine* as a means of exploring the early writings and political loyalties of William Gilbert. She profiles the genesis of the magazine in detail – providing a concise picture of the political and occult interests of the figures involved in the creation of the magazine, which she characterises as an ‘organ of an underground fraternity of politically subversive Free-Masons’.¹³⁹ She uses the political genetics of *The Conjuror’s Magazine* to construct a portrait of the influences acting on Gilbert during his time in 1790s London. This image is constructed to suggest the shared political agenda between Gilbert and his contemporary, William Blake. Schuchard also profiles Gilbert’s increasingly radical contributions. His authorship of a ‘politically daring account’ of Count Cagliostro (who had been criticised by the conservative press for his role in fomenting the French Revolution), and his emphasis on the magician’s strong Rosicrucian and illuminist links, proved ‘risky’ for what Schuchard calls ‘an avowedly Rosicrucian magazine’.¹⁴⁰ The sympathetic portrayal of Cagliostro in January 1792

¹³⁷ *The Conjuror’s Magazine*, I (August 1791), p. 10.

¹³⁸ Paul Cheshire, *William Gilbert: Writings in the Conjuror’s Magazine, or, Magical and Physiognomical Mirror (August 1791–July 1793)* (2009), < http://www.williamgilbert.com/Conjurors_Magazine.htm > [accessed 12 June 2012] (para. 3 of 3).

¹³⁹ Cheshire, *William Gilbert: Writings in the Conjuror’s Magazine* (para. 3 of 3).

¹⁴⁰ Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Rediscovering William ‘Hurricane’ Gilbert: A Lost Voice of Revolution and Madness in the Worlds of Blake and the Romantics* (2005), < http://www.williamgilbert.com/GILBERT_Schuchard.htm > [accessed 29 April 2012] (para. 9 of 29).

‘skirt[ed] close to the limits of seditious publication’.¹⁴¹ But Schuchard identifies that the real danger began when Gilbert predicted the fall of European kings (especially Gustav III of Sweden) in February 1792: ‘After Gustav was assassinated in March, it was widely speculated that the Swedenborgian Masons – including the Swedes who were then resident in London – had collaborated in the plot’.¹⁴² Gilbert entered dangerous territory when he accused the Duchess of York and the Duke of Gloucester (whom Gilbert also accused of maintaining a secret correspondence with French Illuminés) of having occult interests. Finally, in July 1793, ‘with a prediction that “the allies will not continue to triumph till September; their neck is broken already,” Gilbert sang his swan song in *The Conjuror’s Magazine*’, which thereafter adopted an increasingly conservative identity.¹⁴³ For Schuchard, William Gilbert’s own career illustrates the political evolution of the magazine as a whole.

The work of Cheshire and Schuchard has been useful in establishing the origins and political reflexes of *The Conjuror’s Magazine*, but discussion of the text has been limited to its role as a stage in the development of William Gilbert’s career, and has neglected to detail the wider cultural impact of its publication in the context of 1790s London. It is now necessary to consider the magazine as an important literary text in its own right – rather than simply a context for an individual contributor. While both Cheshire and Schuchard have mentioned the complex hybridity of the text, neither has sought to discover the reasons for the magazine’s inherent conflictions. *The Conjuror’s Magazine* as a cultural intervention had a specific agenda and purpose. I want to reveal its influences on the imaginative literature of the period, uncovering

¹⁴¹ Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 9 of 29).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, (para. 10 of 29).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, (para. 18 of 29).

how the discourses circulating in, and by means of, *The Conjuror's Magazine* operate in the Romantic lyric. In a reading that might not seem out of place in a Newlyn-esque discussion about the role of the supernatural in *Lyrical Ballads*, I hope to expose *The Conjuror's Magazine* as a self-aware text, conscious of its agenda to educate its reader out of their superstitious beliefs and gothic curiosities by offering various, often conflicting, occult paradigms and political opinions, encouraging the reader sceptically to navigate their way through a maze of genre and form. My discussion will thus take its place in an ongoing project, begun by Iain McCalman in 1988, that seeks to excavate the 'radical underworld' of 1790s London, populated by both political enthusiasts and occult figures.¹⁴⁴

The Conjuror's Magazine emerged during a period of increased governmental pressures on publication. The 4 July 1791 issue of the *Gloucester Journal* reported that a suppression order on the second edition of Ebenezer Sibly's *New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences* had been lifted:

the cabal, formed on purpose to cry down this interesting book, hath been defeated, and driven from every argument set up against it. —The Act of Parliament, by which the work was at first suppressed, has since been repealed.¹⁴⁵

Marsha Keith Schuchard argues that Sibly's occult text presented a particular concern to Pitt's government owing to its dedication to the head of the Freemasons and the

¹⁴⁴ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionists and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ *Gloucester Journal* (19 January 1792), quoted in Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 6 of 29).

clear loyalties it owed to the Swedenborgians and abolitionist Methodists. *The Gloucester Journal* alleged in 1792 that ‘the work was at first suppressed, under an idea that it discovered secrets dangerous to be known’. Schuchard suggests that ‘it was [Sibly’s] radical interpretations of the astrological charts of George Washington and the American and French revolutionaries that alarmed Pitt’s government’.¹⁴⁶ *The Gloucester Journal* excitedly revealed that, following the lifting of the ban, it would be publishing Sibly’s occult text in sixty weekly instalments. Inspired, Henry Fuseli (who frequented radical intellectual circles in London, with friends and intimates such as Joseph Johnson and Mary Wollstonecraft, and who had maintained a long relationship with Johann Casper Lavater, who shared his interest in the Swiss Zwinglian church)¹⁴⁷ reacted by proposing cheaply to serialise an English translation of Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*. Lavater’s essays revealed the art of detecting a person’s character simply by examining their physical features. *The Conjuror’s Magazine* was to be appended to this physiognomic text to allow intellectual radicals to repossess the occult that had been appropriated or suppressed by their political rivals, and to rebrand it in the service of a new, radical political agenda.

The Conjuror’s Magazine was ambivalently located in relation to contemporary politics, and many of its contributors had earned governmental notoriety for their radical beliefs. Led by publisher Henry Lemoine, a French Huguenot, contributors to the magazine were assembled to ‘[cater] to the growing demand for anti-government,

¹⁴⁶ Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 6 of 29).

¹⁴⁷ D. H. Weinglass, ‘Fuseli, Henry (1741–1825)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10254>> [accessed 6 June 2012].

astrological, magical, and millenarial literature'.¹⁴⁸ Marsha Schuchard offers a list of writers whose work regularly featured in the magazine:

Lemoine's friend Richard Cosway ('R.C'); the Swedenborgian Masons Ebenezer Sibly, his brother Manoah Sibly, and George Adams; the Masonic magician Katterfelto; the Rosicrucian Francis Barrett ('F.B.');

and . . . William Gilbert ('B.').¹⁴⁹

The Prince of Wales had been a patron of Cosway's portraiture from the 1780s, but Cosway also had a reputation for eccentric mysticism and an interest in the occult, which led him to Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, and later, astrology.¹⁵⁰ Barrett had been writing about magic throughout the 1780s, and described himself as a 'Professor of Chemistry, Natural and Occult Philosophy, the Cabala, etc'.¹⁵¹ He would go on to publish *The Magus, or, Celestial Intelligencer* in 1801,¹⁵² a text that exposed his Rosicrucian interests, and would be ridiculed as superstitious by his enemies. Antiguan astrologer and talisman maker William Gilbert had been linked to the Swedenborgian movement after receiving training from occultist John Henderson (a friendship kindled during Gilbert's stay in Henderson's father's Hanham asylum in 1787, where he was treated for mania).

¹⁴⁸ Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 6 of 29).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, (para. 7 of 29).

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Lloyd, 'Cosway, Richard (bap. 1742, d. 1821)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6383>> [accessed 6 June 2012].

¹⁵¹ W. H. Brock, 'Barrett, Francis (fl. 1780–1814)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53856>> [accessed 6 June 2012].

¹⁵² Francis Barrett, *The Magus, or, Celestial Intelligencer* (London, 1801).

The inclusion of Ebenezer Sibly and his brother Manoah in Schuchard's list of contributors is a matter for debate. Paul Cheshire argues that there is not enough proof that Gilbert and Sibly had forged a friendship (an argument that Schuchard relies on heavily in constructing her narrative of the creation of the magazine). Moreover, Cheshire emphasises the criticisms of Sibly articulated in *The Conjuror's Magazine*:

The April 1792 editorial dismisses Sibly's *Illustration*: 'We only esteem it a quack performance, very unequally executed, by a head incompetent to the task' (p. 368); an article on Culpeper, 'English Astrological Physician' (March 1792, pp. 363–4), announces that an 'improved Edition of [Culpeper's] Astrological Physic and Herbal is now publishing in Numbers, in the House whence proceeds this Magazine'. Sibly had published in 1789 an 'improved' version of Culpeper's *Herbal* in numbers and perhaps this is behind Schuchard's association of Sibly and the CM. But the 1792 edition announced here was a rival version, in competition with Sibly, published by W Locke, the publisher of CM.¹⁵³

Patrick Curry also suggests there was a rivalry between Sibly and the magazine's editor Lemoine, who 'favoured [Worsdale] over the "faulty and erroneous work of Sibly."' ¹⁵⁴ It is important to note that, despite Sibly's inclusion (or otherwise) in *The Conjuror's Magazine*, the publication of his *Illustrations*, despite governmental pressure, still

¹⁵³ Paul Cheshire, *Astrological References and Background* (2011), <<http://www.williamgilbert.com/astrobacknd.htm>> [accessed 12 June 2012] (para. 13 of 13).

¹⁵⁴ Curry, *Prophecy and Power*, p. 135–6.

served as inspiration for Lemoine as an important victory in the struggle for freedom to publish occult materials.

Katterfelto's inclusion in the list of contributors has also been cast in doubt following the publication of David Patron-Williams's book *Katterfelto: Prince of Puff*, which has the magician leaving London in 1784 to pursue a fifteen-year tour of Britain.¹⁵⁵ An issue of *The Conjuror's Magazine* in April 1792 includes a letter from an enraged Katterfelto after Lemoine failed to include his predictions in a previous magazine. This new information limits the possibility that Katterfelto had a working relationship with *The Conjuror's Magazine*. Schuchard's identification of Katterfelto as a 'Masonic magician' also requires careful re-consideration in the light of Parton-Williams's study, which argues that 'Katterfelto was using Masonry, rather than being a true initiate into its mysteries, [which] became clear in Sheffield where he invited Freemasons to come and see him "disentangle your system of blunders"'.¹⁵⁶

It is difficult to determine exactly who was involved in the creation of the magazine, and to what extent. Between them, the magazine's known contributors certainly had links to radical Rosicrucianism, Swedenborgianism and Freemasonry. These groups attracted significant political suspicion as they claimed to have access to 'secret' knowledge – a claim that became increasingly dangerous in discourses of radical political prognostication. Lemoine's publication of salacious texts during the 1780s (including *The Kentish Curate, or, The History of Lamuel Lyttleton and Fanny Hill*), his prominence among the London *literati* and his French Calvinism attracted suspicion from reactionary forces keen to suppress the publication of seditious texts.

¹⁵⁵ David Patron-Williams, *Katterfelto: Prince of Puff* (Leicester: Matador, 2008).

¹⁵⁶ Patron-Williams, *Katterfelto*, p. 66.

A publication created and distributed by a French Huguenot caused particular alarm for reactionaries – especially once the ‘Right to Return’ law, passed in December 1790, granted French citizenship to protestant expatriates. The politically charged genetics of *The Conjuror’s Magazine* make the text an important cultural intervention in the contemporary political and literary culture of the metropolis. Its departure from the traditional astrological literary form (the annual almanac) allowed it to achieve sharp relevance and political agility as a monthly periodical. Traditional almanacs forecast weather and general events, whereas *The Conjuror’s Magazine* focused on the contours of contemporary political events.

The Conjuror’s Magazine was published as a monthly periodical from August 1791 to July 1792. Every issue contained a variety of articles, cast in different literary forms and genres, and written by a range of contributors. A typical issue would be divided into sections that maintained some division between the hybrid occult modes at play in the magazine. This inner architecture, or taxonomy, deserves comment. At the forefront of each issue, the astrology section collated nativities, astrological remarks, horoscopic charts and articles that contributed to an understanding of the art. Astrology was the nucleus and focus of the magazine. This is not, however, to say that the magazine offered an introduction to astrology. The complex discussion and use of astrological coding required prior knowledge of the subject. Nativities were drawn for specific (often political) figures, such as William Pitt and Caroline Matilda (the late Queen of Denmark). Astrologers drew charts and posed questions to test their rivals, and often challenged the accuracy of readings to legitimize their own ‘superior’ knowledge. Readers could also write to individual astrologers, asking questions about specific matters. William Gilbert provided monthly predictions from

November 1791 to May 1792. Cheshire describes these pieces as ‘the kind of predictive articles associated with popular astrology’ as ‘there is no attempt to single out the effect on individuals by reference to their own natal charts – the predictions are collective’.¹⁵⁷ These articles would normally concern the weather and the success of harvests – the traditional fodder of most popular almanacs. Most interesting, however, were his (often radical) political prognostications. Gilbert wrote in his ‘Predictions for January’:

The Government of England will be strong – of Austria dejected. The HEAD of Sweden drowned cruelly. The Turks from an intimate union with France, will civilize fast – They will aid each other and afterwards the Russians on the Swedes will join the alliance.¹⁵⁸

This prediction in particular proved highly dangerous as the King of Sweden was assassinated on 29 March 1792. During the earliest months of the magazine’s existence, Gilbert’s readings reflected the political colour of the radical sympathiser, Lemoine.

The eclectic nature of the magazine led to fragmented loyalties within the wider field of astrology, and created tension between the magazine’s writers. The various contributors were careful to highlight the scholarly nature of astrology. A symbiotic relationship between astronomy and prognostication was construed in articles on phenomena such as eclipses and the movements of celestial bodies –

¹⁵⁷ Paul Cheshire, *Writings of, and references to, William Gilbert, or B. in The Conjuror’s Magazine* (2011), <<http://www.williamgilbert.com/ConjMag/ConjMagGilbert.pdf>> [accessed 21 June 2012].

¹⁵⁸ *The Conjuror’s Magazine*, I (December 1791), p. 144.

allying the magazine with the eclectic contemporary astrology practised by Sibly. A legitimization of 'scientific' identity was a particularly important aspect of the magazine's profile, as its writers worked tirelessly to distance their brands of the occult from accusations of mere superstition. An author writing for *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1796 pondered whether natural philosophers 'were silent about [astrology] as a subject they were ashamed of, as unfashionable and beneath their attention; or whether they were conscious that the study of it would not tend to the real happiness and good of mankind'.¹⁵⁹ The striking similarity to the preface of the first volume of *The Conjuror's Magazine* suggests this may have been a direct response to Lemoine's belief in the camaraderie between scientific and occult engagements with the heavens:

Sir Isaac Newton, Dr. Halley, and many other great names are called in to the assistance of Astrology; the first principals of which are founded upon the most essential axioms of astronomy, without which it would be a vague, uncertain science; but when so rationally supported, becomes respectable, and in every point of view will be found replete with useful instruction, and conducive to every salutary purpose of making mankind happier and better.¹⁶⁰

As Curry's *Prophecy and Power* suggests, however, Newtonianism had also been challenged by some articles in the magazine. In March 1792, in a Blakeian move,

¹⁵⁹ *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle for the Year 1796*, 80 (London: F. Jefferies, 1796), p. 826.

¹⁶⁰ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (September 1792), p. i.

Newton's ghost was warned to keep his 'nonsense' of vacuum and attraction out of the way, 'for we are not indebted to mythology and superstition for life and presiding genii in the sun, planets, [for] all creation, but to sound reason, genuine theosophy, and the oracles of GOD'.¹⁶¹

Disciplinary and ideological differences between the realms of astrology, astronomy and natural philosophy ensured that astrology was a 'conflicted science' during the period. An article of April 1793 claimed that young students of astrology are indebted to the magazine 'for a view of the science, stripped of its absurdities and blunders'.¹⁶² Attempts to purify and legitimize the contested art often developed into rivalries between individual astrologers, who would compete within the pages of the magazine to legitimize their own brand of astrological projection: 'It is observable that almost all noted astrologers speak of each other as rogues and impostors'.¹⁶³ Lemoine encouraged and incited these arguments. A disagreement between William Elder (W. E.) and Gilbert (B.) concerning a gentleman's nativity had been ongoing since November 1791. In July the following year, subsequent to Gilbert's silence on the matter since April, Lemoine tauntingly enquired 'What is become of Mr. B.? Has W. E. touched him too closely?'¹⁶⁴

The astrology section profiled above would typically be followed by extracts showcasing various occult texts. Translated passages from the magical treatise *Arbetel's Magic* (1575) and 'Albertus Magnus' Secrets', were a platform for various philosophies of magic and astrology. These were accompanied by discussions of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., (March 1792), p. 340.

¹⁶² Ibid., II (April 1793), p. 333.

¹⁶³ Ibid., I (November 1791), p. 130.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., (July 1792), p. 464.

modern Swedenborgian and Rosicrucian theory. Articles were published about palmistry and augury, as different modes of divination were submitted for comparison with astrology. Metallurgy and alchemy were also explored as avowed 'pseudo-science'. These varied texts offer a window onto the different forms of occult practice that existed in London. Lemoine chose to publish these articles alongside each other, providing his readers with a sceptical lens through which to view conflicting arguments, and encouraging them to calibrate their respective value.

Monthly features such as 'The Querist' encouraged readers to correspond with the magazine's editor. A series of challenging questions would be published to test 'ingenious young readers' in matters of philosophy, mathematics and hermetic theory:

The Querist comes forth monthly to satisfy the inquisitive curiosity of the ingenious correspondent; thus creating, insensibly, moral, physical and philosophical interest in the minds of our young readers.¹⁶⁵

Later issues also included 'Gordon's Paradoxes' – which posed seemingly unanswerable geographical questions, and showed readers how to locate a place in the world where these 'impossible' statements could be rendered true. The closing pages of the magazine were reserved for 'Philosophical and Ingenious Amusements' and 'Dreams, Apparitions &c'. The 'Philosophical and Ingenious Amusements' exposed the mechanical or mathematical workings of various feats of legerdemain. They were often card tricks, or 'smoke and mirrors' hoaxes that relied on simple mathematics,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., (September 1792), p. i.

chemistry or mechanics. These included changing the colour of a rose by burning various chemicals at the base of its stem, opening a spring-operated chest on command, and using probability to determine a person's free choice of cards from a pack. These tricks were designed to be employed in parlours and dinner parties, and played a valuable role in the disaggregation of occult modes, as mere jugglery was exposed as fraudulent. The short supernatural tales that concluded each issue fulfilled a similar role, implicitly separating astrology from a gothic hunger for sensationalism. These supernatural dalliances can be mistaken as mere diversion until they are read in the wider context of *The Conjuror's Magazine's* political agenda. Their significance will be considered below, in the context of the rebranding of the magazine.

Although the sections of the magazine remained largely unchanged from its creation in August 1791 to July 1793, the content and weighting of these were constantly re-moulded as the magazine's new articulation of a political-astrological occult took shape. Different occult factions battled to make their voices heard. Despite the Rosicrucian connections held by various authors, an article in October 1791 lambasted the 'superfluous manner of what they call the signature of all things; of the power of the stars over all corporeal beings, and their particular influence upon the human race, of the efficacy of magic, and the various ranks and orders of demons'.¹⁶⁶ Loyalties within occult 'camps' were also tested, as Swedenborgian supporter Gilbert criticised 'those mystics, nay even receivers of Swedenborg, whose practice has been, hugging the ground like a worm, while their intellect has been basking in some of the brightest beams of divine splendors'.¹⁶⁷ Folk magic was an ambiguous presence within

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., (October 1791), p. 86.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

The Conjuror's Magazine. Several articles were published containing folk charms and cures similar to those that would have been used by cunning men. Henry Lemoine had been known to sell 'quack remedies' from his bookshop in Aldgate in the 1770s.¹⁶⁸ Charms and talismans were particularly valued by several contributors to the magazine, including William Gilbert, who was an experienced talisman maker and advertised his trade in several issues of *The Conjuror's Magazine*. The April 1792 issue includes three charms, one for curing sickness (by drinking water from a deceased pig's skull), one for identifying a thief using crystals, and a third to drive away evil spirits, by 'hang[ing] on the four corners of the house, this sentence written upon virgin parchment. *Omnis spiritus laudet dominum*'.¹⁶⁹ The inclusion of these articles exemplifies the hybridity and layeredness of the magazine, and the difficulties inherent in trying to locate the occult in the 1790s within a single, circumscribed sphere, since the distinction between different modalities of the occult, astrology and science were fundamentally blurred. *The Conjuror's Magazine's* constant struggle to find a composite identity in turn fed the hybridity of contemporary metropolitan occult discourse and practice.

The pamphlet wars of the Revolution controversy had seen occult discourse deployed as political ammunition on both sides of the debate. Early revolutionary sympathisers such as Price were branded as witches and sorcerers. *The Conjuror's Magazine* aimed to forge a new, legitimate occult identity, while also employing the same occult language that had been employed against radical sympathisers, re-inventing and modernising the occult to counter the charges levied against them. If

¹⁶⁸ David Goldthorpe, 'Lemoine, Henry (1756–1812)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16430>> [accessed 6 June 2012].

¹⁶⁹ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (April 1792), p. 389.

their enemies were determined to locate these radical voices as 'other', radical forces were equally determined to redefine the boundaries of the debate by embracing occult personae that could be moulded and manipulated as the political context demanded. *The Conjuror's Magazine* constructed this new, invigorated occult in a public arena, among what it repeatedly refers to as its 'ingenious young readers'.¹⁷⁰

Different political loyalties fought for representation on the pages of the magazine. Radical astrological readings by William Gilbert and 'Astrologus' competed with the contributions of moderate figures such as Elder. Gilbert lamented Elder's increasing conservatism in July 1793: 'how came W.E. to be my open enemy in this Magazine, both personally and as to France?'.¹⁷¹ In January 1793, the trial and execution of King Louis XVI sent a shockwave through Europe. *The Conjuror's Magazine* quickly responded to the news. In its February issue, Elder opened the periodical with his 'Observations upon the Murder of the King of France'. The term 'murder' instantly aligned Elder with loyalist sympathies. He disdainfully rejected 'the cruel and unjust sentence passed on [the King] at his sham-trial by a junto of sanguinary regicides,' and predicted that 'royalty is still to remain with the house of Bourbon, who shall once more ascend the throne of France'.¹⁷² Of course, the variety of writers contributing to the magazine guaranteed disagreements in response to major political events. The following month, radical Astrologus published a piece comparing Louis XVI to his historical English 'prototype', Charles I of England. His reaction to the death of the King is strikingly different from that of Elder:

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., (August 1791), p. 24.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., II (July 1793), p. 517.

¹⁷² Ibid., (February 1793), p. 228.

What a lesson of instruction this awful event furnishes to prodigal and
prolificate rulers . . . because all great public abusers ultimately lead to public
convulsions, or to revolutions in which too frequently the innocent are
exposed and too often share with the guilty irreparable calamities!¹⁷³

Astrologus's response to Elder's moderate view of monarchy exposes the magazine's
political hybridity as a forum. The more radically-minded correspondents were largely
indebted to the publications of Thomas Paine during the early 1790s. The wider
context of revolutionary debates and political rivalry is reflected in the pages of the
magazine, played out in disagreements over representations of the occult and
astrological portents, coming to light in struggles over the use and control of language.
Astrologus's response to Elder's predictions regarding the French monarchy takes a
Paineite stance on the reified symbols that disenfranchise the gullible subject:

Astrologus expects the British troops will be engaged in action in the course
of the next month; that rivers of blood will deluge the plains of the French
Republic; that the people of France are destined to suffer unutterable
miseries; but that, in a few months, heaven will abate the pride, or assuage
the malice, or defeat the purposes of the Germans; for although a throne has
often screened injustice, he asks, can a crown consecrate rapine any more
than a woollen night-cap?¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Ibid., (March 1793), p. 272.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., (April 1793), p. 314.

The response recalls Paine's discussion of the need to expose arbitrary verbal acts – and thus ideological networks – in *Rights of Man* (1791):

What is this metaphor called a crown, or rather what is monarchy? Is it a thing, or is it a name, or is it a fraud? . . . Doth the virtue consist in the metaphor, or in the man? Doth the goldsmith that makes the crown, make the virtue also? Doth it operate like Fortunatus' wishing-cap, or Harlequin's wooden sword? Doth it make a man a conjuror? In fine, what is it?¹⁷⁵

As outlined in the initial chapters of this thesis, the occult had become embroiled in the battle over meaning, especially owing to its ties with literary figures that conjured suspicions of sedition, such as allegory and metaphor. Both sides of the revolutionary debate armed themselves both with and against a discourse that denoted political jugglery and deception. The debunking of illusory legerdemain in *The Conjuror's Magazine* registered a wider radical political agenda to reveal the trickery of aristocratic language. By legitimizing their own craft, radical astrologers attempted to reverse the charge levied against them, as political jugglery was exposed on both sides of the revolutionary debate.

Over time, the general tone of the magazine began to adopt a more outwardly moderate stance, as some of the contributors felt that an increasingly overt radical tone was becoming a hostage to fortune. May 1792 marked a turning point as the editor took the suggestions of the increasingly moderate Swedenborgian George

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 135

Adams into consideration, assuring his readers that 'proper attention has been paid to his remarks'.¹⁷⁶ Schuchard argues that 'from this point forward, though the magazine maintained its Whiggish perspective, its astrological predictions would favour George III'.¹⁷⁷ This is likely to have been a response to the royal proclamation against seditious writings on 21st May 1792, which called for the indictment of Paine for his *Rights of Man*. Richard Garnett's biography of William Gilbert suggests that 'his radicalism eventually led to his falling out with the magazine's more cautious editors'.¹⁷⁸ Gilbert's final article was published in July 1793. A month later the magazine, 'ever anxious to testify their respect for the public,' performed a complete image overhaul, changing its name to *The Astrologer's Magazine*. Lemoine claimed that the new title met the intellectual demands of their readers:

As many philosophical friends have objected to the title of our magazine, deeming the epithet CONJUROR as repulsive to enlightened minds, and discreditable to science, we have, by and with the advice of our privy council, resolved to continue this work, with many improvements, under a somewhat different title.¹⁷⁹

Far more changed than simply the title, however. Shedding the articles about conjuring tricks and supernatural stories, the magazine became firmly grounded in astrological matters. Lemoine sold the rebranded *Astrologer's Magazine* to a new

¹⁷⁶ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (May 1792), p. 400.

¹⁷⁷ Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 14 of 29).

¹⁷⁸ Richard Garnett, 'Gilbert, William (1763?–c.1825)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10706>> [accessed 12 June 2012].

¹⁷⁹ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, II (May 1793), p. 354.

publisher. Schuchard argues that ‘though the magazine continued to praise the English [and Scottish] reformers – such as Priestley, Walker, Eaton, Muir, and Palmer – it no longer catered to the Swedenborgian Illuminés’.¹⁸⁰ However, while the magazine began to adopt a more outwardly conservative image, its contributors continued to rally against the suppression of free speech and publication in the 1790s.

Armed with the ability to dispel the bewitching words of propagandists, readers would have the opportunity to make their own voices and opinions heard. In April 1792, an article appeared that posited audiences as enablers of a false magician’s power. Recognising mere linguistic ‘trickery’ was essential to avoid being blindly led by the artifice of rhetoric:

The astonishment of the spectators encreases [sic] as their senses are imposed upon: in fact, they themselves (though they do not know it) assist the deceit! for, being more attentive to the trick than to the performer of it, they cannot see or comprehend how it is done; when, were they acquainted with the manner, a little practice would make them capable of doing the same.¹⁸¹

The Conjuror’s Magazine is an intellectual call to arms, encouraging its readers to scrutinize ‘things as they are’ and things as they appear – the tricks of physical and verbal ‘representation’. Astrologers writing for the magazine accused rival contributors of submitting false predictions, and scrupulously sought to highlight what

¹⁸⁰ Schuchard, *Rediscovering Gilbert* (para. 19 of 29).

¹⁸¹ *The Conjuror’s Magazine*, I (April 1792), p. 387.

they considered to be mistakes. These disputes took place publicly in the magazine. Readers were encouraged to explore previous issues to identify these faults for themselves, ensuring that every word was carefully sifted: 'I suppose it is by this time sufficiently obvious to every person that has read with attention, that Mr. B. is in an error'.¹⁸² In November 1793, 'Mercurius' challenged a supposed mistake in the nativity of a young girl made by astrologer J. Wright. Wright, 'little expecting Mercurius would be so uncandid as to give such a quibbling and evasive answer' cuttingly responded that his challenge merely gave 'convincing proof that he is unacquainted with the method of its calculation'.¹⁸³ Distancing themselves from mere trickery helped the magazine's authors to legitimise and modernise their own brand of the astrological-political occult, and determine where their own allegiances lay. The magazine acts as a critical debating forum that gives many different voices the opportunity to speak and, importantly, to question. The preface appended to the first volume of the magazine on 10 September 1792 stated that 'the fore-telling of future events, is not the principal purpose of our plan'. Instead, the magazine intended to

mingle instruction with delight, display hidden truths; set the mind on thinking to solve occult and mysterious properties of nature, and account for seeming irregularities; to explain in an easy and comprehensible manner many curious problems and even to challenge the public.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid., (July 1792), p. 467.

¹⁸³ *The Astrologer's Magazine*, I (December 1793), p. 171.

¹⁸⁴ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, II (September 1792), p. i

The demystification of the 'Philosophical and Ingenious Amusements' distanced the magazine's brand of political astrology from entertaining (and deceptive) legerdemain. Several articles entitled 'The English Fortune Teller', which had been promised from the first issue following 'the request of several ladies',¹⁸⁵ exposed false fortune tellers, and replaced their predictions with wisdom:

I dare aver that I can prove every man and woman to be fortune tellers, though not professedly so, as is understood by the name, or such as get a precious penny from the credulous; but what is advising, giving council, but fortune telling?¹⁸⁶

Exposing trickery allowed the magazine's occult practitioners to reverse the accusations of superstitious jugglery pedalled by their political rivals. *The Conjuror's Magazine* turns the charge of trickery back against the forces of political hegemony. Brandishing superstitious forms of the occult, and the names of famous court stage magicians, the article 'Intolerance in Religion and Politics' attacked Pitt's attempts to suppress publication:

Our liberties were purchased by our ancestors by many a glorious struggle . . . shall it be destroyed by the unparalleled hypocrisy of a juggler, with whose dexterity and success in the arts of deception, that of Flockton, or Breslaw, or Comus, or Pinetti, are not to be compared?¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., I (August 1791), p. 190.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., (January 1792), p. 190.

¹⁸⁷ *The Astrologer's Magazine*, I (November 1793), p. 138.

The magazine's readers were instructed in the art of unmasking figures that pedalled mere deception. The ingenious and philosophical amusements were designed to entertain, yet they also performed a dual function by educating its readers in recognition and interpretation – an intervention in the magazine's wider political agenda of sceptical reading. The dynamic of the magazine is 'to query', exposing trickery and encouraging questioning conversation. While *The Conjuror's Magazine* was not strictly an oppositional publication, it can be usefully read as a didactic 'instruction manual' for performing sceptical readings of the wider debates of the early 1790s.

Aware of the suspicions held by counter-revolutionary forces that astrologers and occultists had access to secret information (or could convince the public they did), the magazine's writers carefully negotiated the boundaries between public and privileged knowledge. The pages of the magazine displayed mathematical charts and diagrams, accompanied by very little explanatory information. Planets and signs of the zodiac were figured symbolically, their names rarely written in full. Radical astrologers turned language, the symbol of monarchical power, on its head by promoting their own astrological symbology – a conjunction of celestial danger and secrecy that was especially powerful during a period so suspicious of opaque codes. Radical figures, in possession of a supposed privileged knowledge, communicating in shorthand and publishing political prognostications, raised alarm for Pitt's government. The universality of astrology was also a factor for concern. While counter-revolutionary forces worked tirelessly to suppress radical publications during the 1790s, the one message they could not police was contained in the stars of the night sky. This

emphasis on universal, irrepressible messages would become one of the central arguments of Paine's *Age of Reason*, published in 1794:

It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a *word of God* can unite. The Creation speaketh a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they may be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this *word of God* reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God.¹⁸⁸

A celestial universal message, freely available, spoke to the Romantic preoccupation with stars. During a period of intense surveillance, attempts to construct an 'irrepressible' mode of communication manifested itself in the imaginative literature of the period. To this end, writers experimented with many different genres and forms – from sprawling political tracts, to animal fables, ballads and cradle songs. The vast array of literary modes present in *The Conjuror's Magazine* contributes to the period's experimentation with various modes of political expression. Although critics have recognised the eclectic collage of styles that form the texture of the magazine, it is important to recognise each literary form as a self-aware, politically attuned genre.

¹⁸⁸ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology: Part First* (Boston: Josiah P. Mendum, 1852), pp. 31–2.

The Conjuror's Magazine showcases a characteristically Romantic, 1790s experimentation with form and genre, as writers searched for a new, legitimate literary mode for their brand of the political-occult.

One of the modes employed in the early workings of this Paineite idea of 'radical' correspondence that could not be suppressed was the short, gothic stories that populated the back pages of the magazine until August 1793, entitled 'Apparitions, Dreams &c'. The positioning of these supernatural tales within the magazine clearly marks a separation of discourses, dividing the scholarly astrological mode at the forefront of each monthly instalment from the stories that would be more readily associated with superstitious, easily consumable modes of the occult in the final pages. As already noted, one could be forgiven for mistaking these stories for mere entertainment and folly, intended purely to satisfy gothic curiosities and increase sales. However, despite this practical application, their monthly inclusion (until August 1793) and the amount of space in each issue dedicated to them (often up to ten pages per issue) speaks of their value – and of their political function.

The majority of the supernatural stories included are concerned with seemingly impossible communication. This could be the ghostly appearance of a loved one at the hour of their death, or a message sent from beyond the grave. A typical example of these tales comes from January 1792, describing Mr Wilkinson's apparition to his daughter:

One Mr Wilkinson, who formerly lived in Smithfield, told his daughter, taking her leave of him, and expressing her fears that she should never see him more, that [if] he should die, [and] that if God did permit the dead to see the

living, he would see her again. After he had been dead about half a year, on a night when in bed, but awake, she heard music, and the chamber seemed greatly illuminated, at which time she saw her father, who said, Mal, did not I tell thee I would see thee again! and discoursed with her upon some weighty affairs, and then disappeared.¹⁸⁹

These anecdotes add an element of intrigue and narrative entertainment to *The Conjuror's Magazine*. However, a politicised reading of these stories as supernatural allegories exposes a dual agenda. The unrestricted communication at the centre of these tales is keyed into the wider schema of the magazine. In November 1793, a letter to the editor concerning 'Intolerance in Religion and Politics' attested to the importance of unsuppressed communication and its impact on governmental powers:

A wicked and *corrupt* administration must ever dread an appeal to the world, and will be anxious to keep all the means of information equally from the prince, the parliament and the people.¹⁹⁰

The tales of apparitions and ghosts are supernatural allegories promoting Paineite hopes of untrammelled universal communication. These supernatural allegories negotiated fears of governmental suppression, as 'it is by the liberty of the press, and the liberty of speech alone, that absolute power is kept at bay'.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (January 1792), p. 197.

¹⁹⁰ *The Astrologer's Magazine*, I (November 1793), p. 136.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

As the decade wore on, surveillance intensified. Heated debates about what could be interpreted as sedition made publishing a dangerous trade. Allegorical writing was suspected of harbouring coded messages and came under severe scrutiny. An issue of *The Conjuror's Magazine* published in April 1793 revealed the pressure the increasingly frequent libel trials were having on publication:

Perceiving, says our correspondent, that a satellite of the treasury can pour down the most exemplary vengeance on an unfortunate person at Leicester, for a publication which the praiseworthy juries at Birmingham and Warwick deemed perfectly innocent, he desists for the present from entering into a minuter detail of the operating effects of the celestial influence, lest by some '*Tiberian Law*', he should be found guilty of *a traitorous correspondence with the stars!*¹⁹²

This is exactly the kind of joke that radicals such as Thelwall were making in response to the libel, sedition, and treason trials of the mid-1790s. During Daniel Isaac Eaton's trial, his defence lawyers claimed that the intense surveillance of publication meant that 'there is scarcely a fable that will not furnish an indictment,' exclaiming that 'Aesop's Fables is the most seditious book that ever was published'.¹⁹³ Damian Walford Davies has emphasised how allegorical tales such as Thelwall's 'King Chaunticlere; or, The Fate of Tyranny' (1795) attracted odium from the forces of reaction, and how Thelwall's playful deployment of allegory 'persuades, educates and

¹⁹² *The Conjuror's Magazine*, II (April 1793), p. 314.

¹⁹³ *The Trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton* (London, 1794), p. 35–6.

thus emancipates its audience through the ludic substitutions of the animal fable'.¹⁹⁴

Thelwall's paradigmatic act in his mid-decade fable of revealing the 'common tame scratch-dunghill pullet'¹⁹⁵ hiding behind the strident aristocratic gamecock performs the same task as the unveiling of the magician's tricks in *The Conjuror's Magazine* – it dispels the spell of aristocratic trickery. As an intervention in the Romantic struggle to find viable literary forms to inhabit, *The Conjuror's Magazine's* metropolitan occult allegories were revealed as a Paineite expression of the power of uninhibited, universal communication. Exercises in sceptical reading educated readers to identify deceptive jugglery in the wider political context, and encouraged active participation in political and celestial interpretation. In this context, astrology itself became a seditious allegory firmly located in the debates about what exactly constituted dangerous publication in the 1790s.

¹⁹⁴ Damian Walford Davies, 'Capital Crimes: John Thelwall, "Gallucide" and Psychobiography', *Romanticism*, 18.2 (2012), p. 56.

¹⁹⁵ John Thelwall, 'King Chaunticlere; or, The Fate of Tyranny' (1793), quoted in Walford Davies, 'Capital Crimes', p. 56.

Chapter 2: Political Jugglery¹

In 1797 the radical John Thelwall sought 'retirement' in the rural bucolic setting of Llyswen in Breconshire. The second part of this chapter explores his adoption of the identity 'conjuror' – fraught, as this identity was, with social ambiguities – as a means of empowerment within a Welsh landscape and community that he was completely alien to. In order to contextualise Thelwall's choice to adopt popular magic as a mode for individual and public reinvention, the first half of this chapter registers the immersion of material occult cultures in the political discourses of the Revolution Controversy of the 1790s. In order to profile the impact that living cultures of popular magic had on Romanticism's literary representations, it is necessary to consider the role of superstitious belief in the wider contexts of the social and political debates that informed the imaginative universes of poets such as Thelwall, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. This profile of the polemical texts produced on both sides of the debate seeks to reveal the ways in which cultures of popular magic (and other modes of occult practice) were invoked and embedded in the decade's political discourse.

Discourses of the Revolution Controversy

The anonymous² caricature *Tom Pain's Effegy: or the Rights of a Sed[i]tious Poltroon* (1793), depicts the notorious radical being burnt at the stake [fig. 5]. The political figures Burke, Pitt and Dundas dance around the furnace, represented as three

¹ A version of the Thelwall material in this chapter was published as an article, as follows: Stephanie Churms, "'There was One Man at Llyswen that could Conjure": John Thelwall – Cunning Man', *Romanticism*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2013), pp. 197-206.

² Perhaps drawn by John Nixon. See David Duff, 'Burke and Paine: Contrasts', *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution* (ed. Pamela Clemit), pp. 57–8.

twisted, witch-like figures who would not look out of place in a Füssli-inspired illustration of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (the kilt worn by Dundas perhaps serves as a nod not only to his nationality but also to Shakespeare's 'Scottish Play'). Burke leads the proceedings, his arms and hands lifted in a traditional magician's pose as he brandishes what could easily be seen as a wand. Through the smoke, the silhouettes of several conjured demons materialize among verses of what appear to be political incantations: 'Come let us dance and sing / Long live our noble King / God save the King'. Paine's effigy is equipped with a quill and tailor's scissors – a dig at his composite career identity. He flames on a furnace built of weapons and political slogans and catchphrases inscribed on pieces of paper. In popular magic practice, the burning of script on paper was a mode of guaranteeing the efficacy of a charm or curse. Cunning man Richard Morris, for instance, assured his clients that 'burning scraps [of paper] without looking into the contents' could cure various medical disorders.³ The burning of political slogans in the caricature suggests on the one hand the dangerous power of radical revolutionary language, and on the other, the 'counter-charms' of the State's disciplinary spectacles.

The artist is keen to represent the conservative fear that led to the demonization of Paine's *Rights of Man* as a mode of the irrational superstition. At the same time, the caricature attempts to make Burke and his fellow witch-hunters inhabitants and agents of a pre-enlightened, superstitious universe. Particularly striking is the way the image testifies to the presence of a discourse of popular belief in magic and superstition in the written and graphic texts of the Revolution

³ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris Esq.* (London, 1798), p. 36.

controversy – a discourse that was deployed on both sides of the debate as a tool of political condemnation.

As a window onto the political writing of the period, this caricature usefully focuses the issues at stake. Political caricature reflected the ideological ambiguities haunting 1790s debates about representation and enfranchisement, natural rights and history's inheritance more generally. Gillray's famous print, *Smelling out a Rat* (1790) is characteristically ambiguous; as Draper Hill notes: 'it is typical of Gillray's ambiguity that the content should criticise Paine while the form ridicules Burke'.⁴ This ambivalence is also present in *Tom Paine's Effegy*, which involves the forces of reaction in the very 'superstition' the State's cleansing fire is supposed to purge. Political discourse was similarly indeterminate – semantic territory to be fought over, defined, desynonymised, or rendered equivocal, according to the ideological purpose of the writer.

By presenting a terrifying, irrational image shadowed by unregenerate 'history', the artist undermines the comforting, paternalistic vision of the past on which Burke relies. Owen Davies suggests that the 'reluctance and embarrassment on the part of magistrates to invoke a law that talked of witchcraft and magic'⁵ during the early nineteenth century led to the secularised Vagrancy Act of 1824, passed to control the activities of cunning folk, but with no mention of magic. This embarrassment stemmed from a reluctance to appear to subscribe to the superstitious beliefs of an outmoded past. By caricaturing Pitt, Dundas and Burke as

⁴ Draper Hill, *Mr Gillray the Caricaturist* (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), p. 42.

⁵ Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003), p.25.

witch hunters, the cartoon locates them in a pre-Enlightenment universe, detached from contemporary political and material realities.

My intention is to discover why popular magic became a major rhetorical trope and tool in the political writing of the period, and to determine its origins. Marilyn Butler describes the Revolutionary debates of the 1790s as ‘a single series of works which depend for their meaning upon one another, upon the historical situation which gave them birth, and upon the different types of reader for whom they were designed’.⁶ Historicist readings of the period have seen these texts as constituting a dialogic network or conversation. The language of political debate evolved fluidly during the 1790s, receiving linguistic transfusions from a number of disciplines as the debate developed, enabled by an explosive print culture. The notion of language as dangerous imposition, as a tool of ideological bewitchment, became a defining concern. Indeed, the Revolution Controversy can usefully be seen as a battle over language itself – a focus that becomes particularly clear if one is attuned to the ways in which a discourse of the occult is deployed throughout the debate. At the heart of the dialogue is a shared but multi-valent language to which both radicals and reactionaries vigorously laid claim. Both sides of the debate arm themselves both with, and against, a language and a history that denotes superstition, illusion and bewitching incantation.

Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* relies on a narrative of historical continuity and entailment to construct an emotionally charged, psychologically gratifying and nostalgic view of monarchy and the aristocracy. His

⁶ Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 2.

vision of paternalistic inheritance is rooted in a discourse of domestic relations. Burke believed that the past acts as a warning against tyranny and unnatural rule; 'in history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind'.⁷ It is this wish to adhere to the values sanctioned by 'history' that allowed Paine and Wollstonecraft the opportunity to represent Burke's ideology as 'gothic' anachronism. They felt that, by stressing the importance of the past, Burke initiated a discourse that harks back to an older, more superstitious time governed by fear, to the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were steeped in religious ideology and were intimately connected with societal control. Those accused of witchcraft were seen to be undertaking the devil's work, proof of whose reality was afforded by scripture. For Burke's rivals, the past was merely an arena for superstitious, emotional manipulation.

Paine was keen to ensure that his political arguments were sharply attuned to present needs. His chosen idiom was itself one of those arguments. His attempts to revolutionise and simplify political communication were partly a response to Burke's rhetorical style. History and verbal discourse are intimately linked, and it is impossible to discuss one without considering the other – popular magic practice was, after all, intimately embedded in networks of textual and oral exchange. Relying heavily on the charm (and charms) of an 'othering' language, these discursive cultures are steeped in the power of a resonant 'past'. This is perhaps why Paine chose to use a system of numbers and graphs in Part 2 of *Rights of Man* (1792) in order to escape the history by which textuality and language are condemned, highlighting his position at the

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 130.

forefront of modern political thought. Forgoing, or hybridising, language itself denotes a mind wary of the power language possesses to manipulate rational thought.

Mary Wollstonecraft also grasped the opportunity to target Burke's historical fancy. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) accuses Burke's 'present' of being predicated on a vision of the past, hobbled by imaginative and selective idealisations – a vision that ignored what 'inheritance' owed to 'bold rebellion':

You have turned over the historic page; have been hackneyed in the ways of men, and must know that private cabals and public feuds, private virtues and vices, religion and superstition, have all concurred to foment the mass and swell it to its present form; nay more, that it in part owes its slightly appearance to bold rebellion and insidious innovation.⁸

For Wollstonecraft, Burke's deployment of history further implicated him in a superannuated world existing beyond the realms of rationality. What she and other radicals offered was an escape from this history governed by superstitious fear.

The idealisation of history evolved to be both a strength and a weakness in the counter-revolutionary battle. However, accusations of being in thrall to 'superstition' were not the preserve of the radical argument only. Burke also developed a discourse that denoted his rivals' proximity to cultures of superstition and popular magic in his resistance to radical and dissenting ideology. As outlined in my introduction, Burke

⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications*, ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Essex: Broadview Press, 2001), p.67.

(along with other reactionaries including Robison, Reid and Barruel) had launched attacks on what he considered to be dangerously occult revolutionary societies who were conspiring to bring about the fall of monarchy and Christianity. These alarmist attacks on groups such as the freemasons, the Avignon prophets and others failed to disaggregate between different branches of occult practice, instead conflating them in the levelling heat of popular debate as a monolithic entity.

When he stood in the pulpit on the 4 November 1789 to deliver 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country', Richard Price triggered a dramatic response. He appealed to his fellow religious dissenters to reconsider their position within the social system through an appeal to the following pre-ordained rights:

Firstly, the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters

Secondly, the right to resist power when abused. And

Thirdly, the right to chuse our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct and to frame a government for ourselves.⁹

Price's tendentious sermon, published as a pamphlet, attracted the immediate attention of Burke, whose seminal response pays particular attention to Price's conflation of political and religious dissent. Published in 1790, Burke's anti-revolutionary tract appeared at a time when the revolution was still proceeding constitutionally; indeed, it had received a cautious welcome from those who saw France as following England's enlightened example. Post-1792, however, Burke's

⁹ Richard Price, 'A Discourse on the Love of Our Country', *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 23–32, p. 29.

Reflections seemed uncannily prophetic. Burke himself consciously adopted the discourse of prophecy:

[T]he event, I dare venture to prophesy, will be, that, with some trouble to their country, they will soon accomplish their own destruction.¹⁰

Of course, as indicated in the introduction to this thesis, many different modalities of prophecy were circulating during the decade, some of which could be reconciled with orthodox religious belief. Commentators such as Conor Cruise O'Brien and Frans De Bruyn have contended that Burke's brand of prophecy – in contrast to that of Price – is completely detached from any notions of the popular millenarian thought that came to be associated with the occult:

In Burke the prophetic gesture is a thoroughly secularized one. Though he is often credited with almost supernatural foresight, especially as regards the course of the French Revolution, that prescience can be explained, as Conor Cruise O'Brien argues, by his 'penetrating powers of observation, judicious inference from what was observed, and thorough analysis of what was discerned by observation and inference' – in short, by his exercise of the rational qualifications of the comprehensive viewer.¹¹

¹⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 253.

¹¹ Frans De Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 141.

However, if this view of Burke has, itself, the obvious advantage of hindsight, it also labours under the disadvantage of a critical oversight. De Bruyn's secularisation of Burke's prophetic gesture is an implicit acknowledgement of the proximity between popular (or 'occult') prophecy and political discourse in the 1790s – territory that has remained underexplored.

Burke's angle of entry into Price's sermon is the vision he conjures of the Welsh dissenting minister as conjuror. A caricature emerges that relies for its effect on a language seen as an occultation of political plain-speaking. Burke characterises Price as having

some good moral and religious sentiments, and not ill expressed, mixed up in a sort of porridge of various political opinions and reflections; but *the Revolution is the grand ingredient in the cauldron*.¹²

Not only does Burke attack his rival's lack of political consistency; he also draws strong links between the revolutionary movement and what he considers to be superstitious cultures of magic. Readers of *Reflections* would certainly have registered the association between the cauldron and witchcraft. Burke feared the superstition of the dissenting community, blindly following its major ideologue without properly considering the consequences for the social order as a whole. Similarly, he feared the spread of a wilder revolutionary response by those who failed to appreciate the true ramifications of violent change:

¹² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 155 (my emphasis).

We are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces and put him into the *kettle of magicians*, in hopes that by their *poisonous weeds and wild incantations* they may regenerate the paternal constitution and renovate their father's life.¹³

Magic here represents unnatural parricide. The alarmist conflation of co-existing (yet vitally distinct) modes of occult practices is evident here, as traditional symbols of witchcraft become entangled within the depiction of Price as symbolic of the secretive, occult world that threatened to endanger the very roots of a society rendered stable by paternalistic inheritance. As Butler argues,

Burke's Price is the first of those travesties of Enlightenment intellectuals – conspirators, freemasons, illuminati, mad, bad scientists and philosophers which turn-of-the-century counter-revolutionaries conjure up in order to discredit reform movements and their leaders.¹⁴

Burke's occult colour registered conservative fear regarding the incantatory power of Price's original sermon and its continued life in printed form. Its oracular pronouncements and its registering of a prophecy fulfilled – 'I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error'¹⁵ – are

¹³ Ibid., p. 260 (My emphasis).

¹⁴ Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 224.

portrayed as dissenting witchery. The preacher, appropriately attired, standing at a dissenting pulpit, 'chaunting a prophetic song' with a non-metropolitan accent – 'a man much connected with literary caballers'¹⁶ – becomes a Welsh wizard peddling a dark and superstitious radical ideology, imperilling the political souls of his audience with dissident knowledge. Burke may well have been concerned by Price's connections with politicised occult cabals in England, on the continent and in America, but his attack frequently deploys language that denotes Price's insertion in living, contemporary folk occult practice. For Burke, there was little distinction to be made between dangerously revolutionary masonic occult influences and the magical practitioners operating on a mundane level. For Burke, Price's incantatory radical sermon was part of the same occult conspiracy as that operating on a masonic level, pitched at a demographic who continued to rely on, and be in thrall to, cunning folk.

Burke's invocation of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,¹⁷ one of the major theoretical documents inherited from Enlightenment debates, marks an anxiety regarding language as a tool of ideological control. 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification', Locke argues,

stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those Ideas are collected from the Things, which they are supposed to represent.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1767), p.317.

¹⁸ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 405.

Burke is similarly exercised by the relationship between sign and signified as depending on the ideas 'collected' from experience. Such 'ideas' are susceptible to manipulation and coercion. The relationship between word and object is based largely on human emotion – making language itself a dangerous agent of control:

Burke had noticed that despotic governments use the sublime to terrify and control people by playing on their 'passion of fear'. Hence tyrannies associate themselves with terrifying powers, with vague and suggestive ideas similar to 'notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, [and] affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings'.¹⁹

However, as Tom Furniss notes in *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*,

Burke shares Locke's anxiety about the abuses of language which exploit its arbitrary nature, but while Locke urges that discourse be stripped of figuration, ambiguity and obscurity, Burke celebrates such devices and effects. Yet Burke still wants to be able to identify and guard against the employment of language for 'illegitimate' political and moral ends.²⁰

¹⁹ Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event* (London: Brown University Press, 1988), pp. 61–2.

²⁰ Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 105.

Burke found himself desperately trying to negotiate the delicate balance between the arbitrariness and emotional motivatedness of language. As Furniss further notes,

If their 'ignorance' renders [the people] more liable to 'admiration', then they are also more liable than the 'cultured classes' to rise as a sublime force . . . [The people's susceptibility] is at once the condition which enables their repression within the traditional order and, at the same time, that which makes them responsive to . . . the discourse which celebrates the French Revolution.²¹

Similarly, the radical camps believed that it was exactly this monopoly over language that enabled the ideological 'hailing' of the people. Those who 'owned' language held power.

Burke feared that the language that would emerge from the radical discourses of the 1790s would be potentially devastating in terms of maintaining unquestioned hegemony over the people. As Blakemore argues, for Burke, 'the revolutionaries are linguistically dishonest, for they change the accepted meanings of words to suit their ideological preconceptions'.²² Radical political discourse imparted what Burke felt was fatal 'revolutionary knowledge'. This became a problem for a reactionary and increasingly paranoid government, struggling to control the emancipating rhetoric of both radical plain-talking and the *technical* discourse of democratic oppositional theory:

²¹ Furniss, *Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 103.

²² Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language*, p.103.

[T]he opposite of sublime ignorance is revolutionary ‘knowledge’, which, Burke suggests, constitutes a fall from innocence into the knowledge of evil . . . Indeed, revolutionary criticism claims to reveal knowledge of all that is hidden by popes, kings and aristocrats – all that is veiled by time, tradition, and superstition.²³

Burke felt that a linguistic shift had begun to assert itself. His reflection on the word ‘protestant’ suggests his fear that language had become illusory, arbitrary and dangerously fluid:

Burke observes that the word *protestant* has ceased to have an essentially religious meaning. Because it is unnaturally yoked to the new meaning of *ascendancy* and the ‘policy which is engrafted on it, the name protestant becomes nothing more or better than the name of a persecuting faction’. Indeed, this word is the charm that ‘locks up in the dungeon of servitude three million of your people’. It is a ‘spell of potency’ an ‘abracadabra that is hung about the necks of the unhappy, not to heal, but to communicate disease’.²⁴

There is a parallel for Burke between political constitutions and language itself: both should follow received, inherited examples and be grounded in the stability of custom.

²³Ibid., pp. 68–9.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

Blakemore picks up on the implications of Burke's critique – that radicalism pathologises language into a 'new kind of old witchcraft, superstition and black magic',

[A] new dungeon of meaning that locks up an already enslaved people, wounding and contaminating them with the authority of its *dark power*.²⁵

For Burke, the democratised language of the radical camp became an occult version of political discourse. Radical words became performative spells, framed to ensnare an unsuspecting public. The simplification of language presented a particular threat, appealing as it did to a disenfranchised demographic that was in contact with the living occult culture of the cunning man and conjuror.

A major shift in the tenor and reach of political language came about in the form of Paine's critique of Burke's *Reflections*, and in particular Paine's response to Burke's ornate and highly metaphorical idiom. Tom Furniss notes that 'Paine puts "nature" and "natural" language before rhetorical artifice', and that his rhetorical figures 'are taken from everyday life and from popular literature'.²⁶ I suggest that many of the 'everyday' figures that Paine deploys have their origins in a popular culture in which magic was a living, embedded phenomenon, an enduring linguistic and conceptual repository that found a new agency in a revolutionary arena.

²⁵ Ibid., (my emphasis).

²⁶ Tom Furniss, 'Rhetoric in Revolution: The Role of Language in Paine's Critique of Burke' *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, ed. Keith Hanley and Raman Selden (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 23–48, p. 24.

An education in recognising rhetorical ‘trickery’ was considered a valuable tool in being able to decipher a text’s agenda – without it, one was vulnerable to being blindly led by the artifice of rhetoric into supporting a corrupt political stance. When the first part of Paine’s *Rights of Man* appeared in 1791, one of the major concerns for conservative commentators was its stylistic accessibility – rendered all the more dangerous, of course, by its price (sixpence). Paine’s democratisation of political language devolved political debate to a wider audience through, as Butler has it, ‘a style designed to hold the attention, and secure the trust, of an audience which was accustomed to being governed but not to being written to’.²⁷ Paine certainly achieved this, as the immense popularity of his tract soon demonstrated.²⁸ When Paine was eventually tried in 1794, it was the very reach of his ideas that led the courts to condemn him as being guilty of sedition.

Paine’s scathing reaction to Burke’s *Reflections* focused on the Burkean idiom to construct a bitter argument about his misuse of language. Just as Burke had accused Price of using language as incantation, so Paine accuses Burke of attempting to manipulate the hearts and minds of the country with an empty discourse predicated on ‘magical’ substitution:

I know a place on America called Point-no-Point; because as you proceed along the shore, gay and flowery as Mr. Burke’s language, it continually recedes and presents itself at a distance ahead; and when

²⁷ Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, p. 109.

²⁸ Marilyn Butler’s introduction to Paine’s *Rights of Man* queries the number of copies sold as estimated by several scholars, but the approximate figure for parts I and II lies between one and two hundred thousand; an impressive number.

you have got as far as you can go, there is no point at all. Just thus is it with Mr. Burke's three hundred and fifty-six pages.²⁹

Thus Burke's language is also illusory incantation, conjuror's smoke concealing the emptiness of his chivalric vision of the state and body politic. Paine sees Burke as defrauding the people with empty signs:

But after all, what is this metaphor, called a crown, or rather, what is monarchy? Is it a thing, or is it a name, or is it a fraud? Is it a 'contrivance of human wisdom,' or human craft, to obtain money from a nation under specious pretences?³⁰

Paine's radical deconstructionist tactic locates Burke's language as 'specious' conjury. He asks his readers to attune themselves to the ways in which language itself conspires against its user ('contrivance' in the quotation above resonates with 'deceitful practice' as well as ingenious accomplishment). Paine's words, above, would not have been out of place in testimony against a false conjuror or cunning man – someone who uses 'human craft' to 'obtain money' under false 'pretences'. At this time, people could not be tried for practising witchcraft *per se* – the 1735 Witchcraft Act had made sure of that. They could, however, be tried for imposing on the credulous in order to defraud them. In 1807, for example, John Jones, who was tried

²⁹ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 62.

³⁰ Paine, *Political Writings*, p.125.

for practising deceitful magic, wrote the following statement to avoid a year's imprisonment in Cardiff gaol:

This is to acknowledge my total ignorance of, and disbelief in, such matters, and my concern at having so long imposed on weak and credulous individuals, being at the same time thoroughly sensible of the mischievous tendency of such a traffic . . . I most sincerely hope that this my recantation may be a check to the presumption of any person who may hereafter be inclined to exercise such vile arts for the purpose, not only of deceiving, but likewise pocketing the money of the unwary.³¹

For Paine, Burke's metaphorical crown becomes the false magic of the cunning man – a deceit that the new radical politics, with its commitment to linguistic and interpersonal connectivity rather than substitution, would expose. Burke's appeal to a transhistorical community (and to a language) sanctioned by time hides material, economic depredation.

Paine accused Burke of attempting to establish a 'monopoly of wisdom'³² within the narrow bounds of the ruling class. Burke's language is obfuscatory, discouraging any attempt to come to political knowledge. Such claims on power – and, by extension, on language itself – are, Paine argues, based merely on 'astrological,

³¹ Phillips, D. Rhys, *History of the Vale of Neath* (Swansea: D.R. Phillips, 1925), pp. 582–3, quoted in Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 22.

³² Paine, *Political Writings*, p. 119.

mysterious importance'.³³ Once the questioning mind has achieved a measure of radical 'knowledge', language cannot effect an unlearning of that new political consciousness:

There does not exist in the compass of language an arrangement of words to express so much as the means of effecting a counter-revolution. The means must be an obliteration of knowledge; and it has never yet been discovered how to make a man unknow his knowledge, or unthink his thoughts.³⁴

The idea of a pattern or specific 'arrangement' of words here suggests something very close to a spell or incantation, which again locates the language and rhetoric of the counter-revolutionary side within a culture of the spoken and written charms deployed by cunning folk.

One of the most effective rhetorical tropes characterising Burke's discourse is the metaphor. This allegorical figure drew Paine's scathing criticism, especially in the context of Burke's defence of hereditary titles. 'Titles', says Paine, 'are like circles drawn by the magician's wand to contract the sphere of man's felicity'.³⁵ The hegemony of custom occults the gap between word and thing; a man becomes his title in a process akin to the magician's drawing of a charact, creating a space for himself in which to practise. Paine adds: '[d]oth the virtue consist in the metaphor, or

³³Ibid., p.119.

³⁴Ibid., p.120.

³⁵Ibid., p. 89.

in the man . . . Doth it make the man a conjuror? In fine, what is it'?³⁶ Hereditary titles construct an altered or false version of one's identity; they constitute a magical spell that operates both on the title-bearer and on those in awe of him. Paine knowingly bestows on Burke his own metaphorical title – that of conjuror. In earlier centuries the ability to perform certain strains of magic was considered a partly hereditary trait, but by the eighteenth century this had been largely dismissed as educated attitudes towards cunning folk changed.³⁷ That the ability and right to govern might likewise be inherited is the object of Paine's scorn. Paine considered the false, inherited notions that drew people to trust conjurors especially dangerous in leading them to accept a false ideology:

To the Revolutionaries, of course, Burke's 'veiled' metaphors disguise the illusions that must be stripped away so man can regain his lost freedom. These enslaving metaphors are comparable to Rousseau's 'chains' and Shelley's 'loathsome mask' . . . Hence Revolutionary criticism stresses the removal of the artificial garments that repress man, garments that represent the mystifying traditions and superstitions that revolutionary criticism unveils.³⁸

For Paine, Burke's circles of affinity connecting the 'little platoon' of the family with the larger 'family' of the state are further examples of the magician's circles, illusions busily at work in the counterrevolutionary ideology of the 1790s.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

³⁷ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 70.

³⁸ Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language*, p. 72.

Fears concerning political trickery and the susceptibility of the reading (and listening) public to the spells of linguistic artifice are particularly in evidence in Paine's response to Burke's colourful chivalric account of Marie Antoinette's downfall. Paine's critique again emerges from a discourse of the occult. As Furniss remarks:

Although there is a sense that a metaphor might operate as a conjuror of illusions – as a trick or trickster of language – and is therefore to be distrusted, the assumption seems to be that to dispel its spell effectively it is only necessary to see through and expose the 'trick'.³⁹

For the spell to be exposed it was necessary for the listener or reader to be in possession of the meta-consciousness necessary to 'dispel the spell' of the metaphorical. Paine's challenge was to expose Burke's linguistic subterfuge to the reader, while his own rhetoric remained hidden. Paine strove to remind his readers of his newly packaged, non-metaphorical language – despite the fact that his writing contains as many rhetorical effects and illusions as Burke's – his numerical charts (themselves radical substitutions and symbols) being a prime example.

As a bitter battle over linguistic dominance was fought between Paine and Burke, other reformist writers realised that a simplification of language would be necessary in order to politicise – or depoliticise – a wider audience. Hannah More's *Village Politics* (1793) was one of the most significant tracts promoted by The Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers – a

³⁹ Furniss, 'The Role of Language in Paine's Critique of Burke', p. 29.

group established by John Reeves in 1792 that attracted support from Burke, Pitt and other powerful governmental figures. As witnessed in Chapter 1, More's vernacular made her writing highly popular among the lower classes; indeed, Marilyn Butler argues that her writing was 'even more closely designed for a semi-literate readership than Paine's'.⁴⁰ Accomplished in the service of counter-revolutionary control, More's democratisation of political discourse eschews 'translation' and technical radical terminology in favour of a blanket denunciation of what are presented as newfangled, Latinate watchwords:

Tom: And what mean the other hard words that Tim talks about – *organisation* and *function*, and *civism* and *incivism*, and *equalization*, and *inviolability*, and *imperscriptible*?

Jack: Nonsense, gibberish, downright hocus-pocus . . .⁴¹

During the course of the conversation between two labourers, Jack Anvil the blacksmith and Tom Hod the mason, it is *radical* lexis that is now dismissed as mere spell words. *A Charm for Democracy*, drawn by Thomas Rowlandson and printed in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in 1799, characterised radicals as witches [fig. 6]. Their 'buzz-words' ('universal equality,' 'atheism,' 'political liberty') became kindling to cook up a radical democratic spell. The implication is that the so-called democratisers of language and political rights are in fact thinkers of outré thoughts, users of uncanny

⁴⁰Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, p. 179.

⁴¹ Hannah More, 'Village Politics', *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 179–84, p. 183.

language that masquerades as inclusive but which cultishly interpolates its readership as emancipated subjects. For More, Paine's language is illusory metaphor.

John Thelwall's Autobiographical Occult

John Thelwall has emerged in recent years as a protean figure central to our conception of Romanticism as a literary and cultural phenomenon. Recent work by Judith Thompson, Yasmin Solomonescu and Steve Poole, amongst others, has built on crucial interventions by such critics as Nicholas Roe and Michael Scrivener to extend the narrative of Thelwall's life beyond the fraught political theatres of the 1790s, revealing links between his multiple personae: reformer, 'acquitted felon', political theorist, demagogue, poet of sensibility and protest, novelist, historian, dramatist, political antiquary, professor of elocution, and speech theorist. Moreover, critics have succeeded in revealing the nuances of Thelwall's representations and reinflections of his 'public' and 'private' selves. As Damian Walford Davies remarks: 'we're dealing here not with a simple and (over-)familiar narrative of defeat and opportunistic bourgeois resurrection, but with acts of thoughtful and principled re-fashioning'.⁴² I suggest that we can meaningfully locate a 'bridge' between two stages of Thelwall's life and career in the three-year period (1797–1800) he spent in the Breconshire village of Llyswen: a fascinating transitional 'timespace' that was so much more than a 'parenthesis' between two periods of political-intellectual activity.

⁴² Damian Walford Davies, 'Reviews: Steve Poole (ed.), *John Thelwall: Radical Romantic and Acquitted Felon* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009)', *Romanticism*, 16.2 (2010), pp. 218–32, p. 218.

The foundations for a mapping of Thelwall-in-Wales were established by E. P. Thompson,⁴³ and extended by P. J. Corfield and Chris Evans,⁴⁴ Scrivener,⁴⁵ Walford Davies⁴⁶ and Thompson.⁴⁷ My aim is to contribute to this project by examining Thelwall's occult, and occulted, 'Welsh' identities, and the ways in which the transition from metropolitan and English provincial culture to rural Wales manifested itself in the range of complex literary (self-)representations in his 1801 collection *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement*.⁴⁸ Thelwall flirts with a variety of genres and forms and experiments with each, testing their applications and limits. The portal to the poetry is a 'Prefatory Memoir' – written, suggestively, in the third person. Here, Thelwall showcases his many identities: those of the past, those that were serviceable at Llyswen, and those that equip him for a return to provincial and metropolitan engagement. Dramatized (and advertised) here are the poet, the husband, the father, the wronged radical, the philosopher and – most importantly for my purpose – the conjuror.

Published at a time of political watchfulness, *Poems* was Thelwall's attempt to re-enter the public arena, not in a depoliticised role, but at a new political angle. He published a novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, (1801) under the pseudonym John

⁴³ E. P. Thompson, 'Hunting the Jacobin Fox', *Past & Present*, 142 (Feb 1994), pp. 94–140.

⁴⁴ P. J. Corfield and Chris Evans, 'John Thelwall in Wales: New Documentary Evidence', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 59 (1986), pp. 231–9.

⁴⁵ Michael Scrivener, 'The Rhetoric and Context of John Thelwall's "Memoir"', *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods*, ed. G. A. Rosso and Daniel P. Watkins (London: Associated University Press, 1990), pp. 112–31.

⁴⁶ Damian Walford Davies, *Presences that Disturb: Models of Romantic Identity in the Literature and Culture of the 1790s* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Judith Thompson, 'Overlooking History: The Case of John Thelwall', *Romanticism, History, Historicism: Essays on an Orthodoxy*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 103–26.

⁴⁸ John Thelwall, *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989).

Beaufort⁴⁹ but his decision to publish *Poems* under his own name clearly signifies his intent to return in *propria persona* to public life. Scrivener indicates that ‘one purpose of the “Memoir” is to establish a moral character that would supplant his public persona as a radical politician’.⁵⁰ That ‘persona’ was, however, emphatically a plural entity. In pursuit of a new public identity, Thelwall emphasises that the reader should encounter the volume without the prejudice that might attach to his 1790s career (much as Wordsworth was to deprecate the codes of opinion that would render an encounter with the experiments of *Lyrical Ballads* ideologically difficult): ‘It is The Man and not The Politician, that is here delineated’.⁵¹ Thelwall’s statement is both sincere and a piece of staged rhetoric, of course. *Poems* is the work of a man who has been disenfranchised socially and vocally, and who is searching for new, viable, empowering identities to inhabit – both on Welsh ground and in beckoning English arenas. Thelwall is by no means defeated; the very title of his collection is an attempt to signal volition – the self-determination of ‘retirement’ (as against enforced exile). However, with his voice being his main source of power, he stages a battle against the impotence that comes with silence. It is with these occult and radical vocalities that I am concerned here.

⁴⁹ Adopting the same name as the building where he previously performed his radical lectures, The Beaufort Buildings, was unlikely to have gone unnoticed. The name hints at his rebellious reluctance to withdraw from political ‘activism’.

⁵⁰ Scrivener, ‘The Rhetoric and Context of John Thelwall’s “Memoir”’, p. 117.

⁵¹ Thelwall, *Poems*, p. i.

Geographies of Difference

Removed from the metropolitan spaces to which he was accustomed, Thelwall was required to adjust to the rural Welsh community (which, at the end of the eighteenth century, was still predominantly Welsh-speaking) that awaited him in Llyswen:

From 'Theatres and Halls of Assembly' to a little village of only twenty miserable cottages – from the friendly, the enlightened, the animated circles of Norwich – from the elegant and highly intellectual society of Derby, to the sordid ignorance of a neighbourhood whose boorish inhabitants hash up a barbarous jargon of corrupted Welsh, with still more corrupted English, utterly indigestible to unaccustomed organs, was another of those sudden transitions by which the faculties are necessarily stunned and stupefied.

(Poems, p. xxxviii)

At one point in the 'Prefatory Memoir', Thelwall's inhabitation of a geography of difference takes a startling turn, in the form of a layered ventriloquisation:

Under all these circumstances, it will not appear extraordinary (to such, in particular, as are acquainted with the state of society in those rude parts) that it should have been believed, in some of the scattered neighbourhoods about, "that there was one man at Llys-Wen that could conjure; and that did walk in the woods, by night, to talk with his evil spirits".

The routines that led to this supposed accusation of conjury are identified by Thelwall as ‘his fits of abstraction, his solitary rambles, among the woods and dingles, and above all, the supernatural circumstances of his neither drinking Cwrw, [i.e. ale] smoaking, nor chewing tobacco’ (*Poems*, p. xxxvii). In the context of what Scrivener has identified as the rhetoricity of the Memoir,⁵² I suggest that Thelwall recognised that an occult identity suited him very well at this moment. It captured his alienation and segregation from the Welsh community owing to obvious cultural, linguistic and no doubt political differences. It also invoked historical narratives that legitimised contemporary enmities: Thelwall notes the Welsh antagonism reserved for ‘every SAXON who intrudes, as a settler, among them’ (*Poems*, p. xxxvii). It is not clear who made these ‘accusations’; indeed, it is perfectly possible that the above is a completely fictionalised account. Thelwall plays with the conventions of narrating the self in a layering of speech and may be ‘quoting’ his *own* construction of himself as conjuror. This act of self-ventriloquisation is an attempt both to colonise and to enact the vocalities that had empowered him at Llyswen, and which would legitimise his re-entry into English culture. The conjuror is vocal by trade, and Thelwall is careful to note that he is in the woods at night ‘to talk’ – verbally to invoke his spirits. Thelwall may well be utilising local stories of conjurors’ incantations. Attending to Thelwall’s adoption of this occult identity – a repackaging of his radical *persona non grata* – is crucial in identifying the contours of the living culture of magic during the period in

⁵² Scrivener, ‘The Rhetoric and Context of John Thelwall’s “Memoir”’, pp. 112–31.

various locations of culture, and its influence on the literary representations of the politician-cum-poet in the 'enchanted dormitory' of Llyswen (*Poems*, p. xxxvi).

In the first decades of the early-nineteenth century, the name of John Harries (1785–1839), of Cwrt y Cadno, in the parish of Caio, Carmarthenshire, would have been familiar across much of Wales, and even to those living beyond the border. He was a physician by 'official' trade, but his reputation was based on the cultivation of an adjunct persona: that of the *dyn hysbys* (cunning man). Although Harries would have practised his art a decade or so later than Thelwall's stay in Wales, I refer to him here as representative of the contemporary image and practice of the occult in Wales, and to illustrate the power of 'word of mouth' reputation, as his status as a respected *dyn hysbys* commanded attention well beyond his immediate locality:

The sick and the sorrowful came to enquire of his oracles from all parts of Wales, and from the testimony of the oldest people in the district, he was eminently successful in his cures. Lunatics were brought to him from parts of Pembrokeshire and Radnorshire, and he had a wonderful power over them.⁵³

The occult trade was a battleground of conflicted social, cultural and religious opinion, at the centre of networks of communication. While the above quotation attests to Harries's position of respect and legitimacy within his own Carmarthenshire community as an occult physician, he also faced his share of prejudice. When Harries

⁵³ F. S. Price, *History of Caio, Carmarthenshire* (Swansea: F. S. Price, 1904), p. 54.

was called on to recover the body of a girl at Maesyronnen,⁵⁴ his success in finding the corpse led to his being charged as an accessory to the crime, and earned him notoriety in a Welsh ballad:

*Awn yn alarus
At Doctor Harries
Am ei fod yn hysbys,
I 'mofyn hanes hon;
Dywedai ei bod yn gorwedd
Gerllaw Maes yr On;
Mae ceu-bren mawr o wenwyn
Yn tyfu bwys y lle,
A nant yn rhedeg heibio
Lle'i lladdwyd ganddo fe.⁵⁵*

We go concerned
To Doctor Harries
Because he is 'Hysbys' [a cunning man]
To ask her history;
He said that she was lying
Near Maes yr On;
There is a tree full of poison

⁵⁴ See Richard C. Allen, 'Harries, John (c.1785–1839)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/61967>> [accessed 28 June 2013].

⁵⁵ National Library of Wales, MS 11119B.

Growing by the place,
And a stream runs near
Where she was murdered by him.⁵⁶

Thus the occult practitioner occupied an ambivalent and hazardous position: in, but not of, the community, defined by both participation and difference, both a moral arbiter and a transgressive social actor. Harries's employment as a local 'sin-eater' (a scapegoat role traditionally taken by a social outcast) illustrates the social and moral ambiguities surrounding occult practitioners. I suggest that owing to this over-determined identity, Thelwall, the proscribed democrat, felt a profound connection with such ambiguous figures.

The Carmarthen Antiquary records John Harries's bizarre annual practice of retiring to the dark woods with a volume of magic – its power feared even by Harries himself – to conjure spirits:

Dr. Harries set greatest store on a certain padlocked book. This, the Magic Book, he kept chained, locked and hidden away. His clients were much afraid of this volume and the Wizard declared that he himself regarded it with the utmost awe. By strict command of his Satanic Majesty, he was only allowed to consult it once in each year . . .

⁵⁶ See also Richard C. Allen, 'Wizards or Charlatans - Doctors or Herbalists?: An Appraisal of the "Cunning Men" of Cwrt Y Cadno, Camarthenshire', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies*, 1.2 (Summer 2001), pp. 68–85.

Accordingly Dr. Harries resorted annually with the book to a remote place in the wood.⁵⁷

Thelwall had been ridiculed for his strange practice of peripatetic reading and composition:

[I]t was his constant practice to read as he went along the streets, upon whatever business he might be employed: a practice which, originating in a sort of necessity, settled into a habit, and was not entirely laid aside till his political exertions brought him into notoriety, and produced several remonstrances from his friends on its singularity and apparent affectation.

(*Poems*, p. vii)

It is likely therefore that what locals mistook for his communing with evil spirits was in fact a Thelwallian poetic *dérive*, involving oral enunciation and composition of the lyric and dramatic poetry that would form *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement*. In the woods surrounding Llyswen we glimpse the Thelwall of the coming century – the man who made vocal performance his study. Suggett notes that ‘Some conjurors were believed to keep devils, which permanently resided in their magic books’,⁵⁸ and so the act of walking, reading and writing in the woods came together to bolster Thelwall’s

⁵⁷ *The Carmarthen Antiquary: The Transactions of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society and Field Club* (Carmarthen: V. G. Lodwick & Sons, 1945–1946), II, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Richard Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (Gloucestershire: The History Press Ltd., 2008), p. 100.

local reputation. The composition of poetry thus emerges as a crucial aspect of his newly adopted occult identity.

While it would be wrong to claim that Thelwall was wholly isolated at Llyswen (he certainly sustained his radical correspondence, and travelled, too), it is clear that he was unable to settle happily into a 'retirement'. He spent most of his life looking over his shoulder. Local resentment was fuelled by 'accidents' such as disputes over field boundaries, by the (evidently loyalist) 'harangues' from the pulpit (if Thelwall's Memoir is to be credited) and by the odium that would necessarily have attached to the very name of John Thelwall. Such odium, together with government surveillance, had already thwarted his attempts to settle with Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset. An imagined life of agricultural and philosophical endeavour certainly appealed in the form in which it was wishfully constructed in letters between Thelwall and Coleridge, but the reality of seeking to support his family given a lack of agricultural expertise, inclement weather, public hostility, and personal bereavement was a very different thing. The aura of difference and danger that had accrued around Thelwall led to his search for a role that would be a mode of empowerment; both social and poetic. One way to ensure this within the local community was to take advantage of the surviving belief in magical practice in the area.

Given the range of taxonomic terms for magical practitioners, Thelwall's invocation in the 'Prefatory Memoir' of the term 'conjuror' is significant. Richard Suggett's history of magic in Wales states that 'of the several terms used to refer to cunning folk (*dyn hysbys*, *dewin*, *rheibiwr*, etc.) the word 'conjuror' (*consuriwr*, *conjerwr*, *cynjer*, etc.), used in the Welsh Bible, was widely applied to those with the

highest reputation for occult knowledge'.⁵⁹ The conjuror is reputed to have 'a professional, even academic interest in their craft'.⁶⁰ Thelwall was known to be a man of 'knowledge' – especially in contrast to a neighbourhood that he repeatedly constructs as 'ignorant'. It is also worth noting that the term 'conjuror' referred specifically to a figure only relatively recently preeminent in the occult economy of Welsh communities. As Suggett notes, 'charmners and soothsayers in the seventeenth-century tradition became less important as conjurors grew in reputation'.⁶¹ Reactionary forces were quick to equate radical politics and anachronistic superstition, and so Thelwall was keen to ensure that his identity was aligned with that of the conjuror, rather than that of the charmer (*swynwr*) – partly due to the fact that charmners were believed to draw on the power of the divine through prayer, and partly in an attempt to distance himself from the more amorphous, cartoonish forms of the occult that had been used to demonise his political rivals, such as Edmund Burke, in the pamphlets of the Revolution Controversy.

In Thomas Rowlandson's *A Charm for Democracy* the diminutive figure to the left of the crowd, clutching a copy of his lectures, is Thelwall, crying out 'I'm off to Monmouthshire' [fig. 6]. Rowlandson's geographical inaccuracy is itself interesting, in that it positions Thelwall in the ambiguous territory of Monmouthshire (not quite Wales, not yet England). In many respects, the small Welsh village of Llyswen was the perfect arena for the material and textual staging of Thelwall's rebirth. It was itself borderland territory, a geographical interspace between two cultures. As already noted, (and as the 'Prefatory Memoir' itself confirms), the village of Llyswen would

⁵⁹ Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 84

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

have been predominately Welsh-speaking at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Statistical evidence from the 1801 census confirms that 48.5% of the inhabitants of the county were monoglot Welsh speakers, while 23.3% were monoglot English-speakers; 18.2% were bilingual.⁶² It is difficult to identify the precise linguistic demographic of Llyswen in the final years of the eighteenth century, but it was clearly a settlement where English was increasingly gaining ground. Thus, Thelwall's performance of his radical-occult self took place in a culturally and linguistically plural environment that would have sensitised him to issues of speech, enunciation and accent. Thelwall's choice of the word 'conjuror' (as against other titles to denote magical practitioners) is itself significant in this regard as it seeks to negotiate a language barrier, admitting the Welsh *consuriwr* in a way that cunning man – *dyn hysbys* – clearly would not.

At the same time, the language barrier only intensified Thelwall's position as 'other'. For the disillusioned persona of the 'Prefatory Memoir', local speech is a 'barbarous jargon of corrupted Welsh' (*Poems*, p. xxxviii). In the dramatic romance that opens *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement*, 'The Fairy of the Lake' (considered at greater length below), the clownish Tristram (indebted to *The Tempest*'s Stephano and Trinclo) is given a speech whose comedy is made more astringent by the equation drawn between Welshness, otherness, and magic:

⁶² Dot Jones, *Statistical Evidence Relating to the Welsh Language 1801–1911* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), p. 222.

C-W-R-W- Cwrw!! – Spell, indeed – What are your Runic Rhymes, your
Riddles, your Pharmaceutrias – your Cabals, your Abracadaberas, to the
magical combination of C-W-R-W ? (*sings*)

Of spells you may talk,

Writ in ink, blood, or chalk,

With which Wizzard and Witch have to do;

But each Welchman can tell

That there never was spell

Like C-W-R-W!

(*Poems*, p. 40.)

Thelwall's *spelling out* (in all senses) of the Welsh word *cwrw* – 'ale' – suggests a parallel between the transformative potency of alcohol and the uncanny 'othering' of the self, and of the world, occulted in another language. Welsh was a 'spell'. Tristram's speech works not only to reinforce the cultural stereotype of the Welsh love of alcohol, but also, more interestingly, to construe a link between the Welsh language and hazardous power. In contemporary English writing about Wales, the word *cwrw* was rarely anglicised – instead it was cited in the original Welsh, and then glossed. *Cwrw* thus acts as a motif of resistance, a challenge to the transformative powers of the English language. The indigenous language, already at this time under pressure from Anglicisation, and a marker of difference, casts a sinister spell over Thelwall, alienating him from the rest of the community. A language he did not understand being freely spoken around him would certainly have augmented his paranoia. Owen

Davies notes that the charms used in Wales are striking because ‘apart from those passages written in Latin, the text was nearly always written in English’.⁶³ Davies suggests that this may have been a deliberate attempt to make the charms more mystifying (and thus more awful) to Welsh-speaking ‘customers’ of the occult. Thelwall’s unusual night-time wanderings, in which his English poetry would have been spoken aloud, may well have appeared to the Welsh community as conjury and spoken charms.

Another ‘occult’ character that Thelwall dramatises in his poetry is the vagrant or gypsy. In the poem ‘Epistle to Mercutio’ for example, he laments the ‘poor harmless vagrants’ who are driven from place to place and demonised by the communities through which they pass:

. . . haggard phantoms, with dischordant yell,
Throng round, malign, to brew the fatal spell . . .

But, truth to say, nor comet’s hideous glare,
Nor flame infernal frights the midnight air;
Nor hags, nor demons, with dischordant yell,
Dance round the cauldron o’er the direful spell;
But vagrant Gipsies, on the forests bound,
Squat round their fire loquacious on the ground.

(*Poems*, pp. 113–4)

⁶³ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 162.

These travellers – often associated with magical powers and fortune-telling – are ‘harmless when compar’d with those whom crowds adore and courts reward’ (*Poems*, p. 114) and yet they, like Thelwall, are alienated, accused of infernal alliances, and are unable to remain in one locale for long. In its emphasis that the margin of the forest (interestingly frontier territory) is *not* the theatre of ‘haggard phantoms’ and ‘cauldrons’, the poem quoted above conspires to correct the reader’s gothic desires, and functions as political intervention, challenging febrile, sensationalist constructions of the occult in the rhetorical point-scoring of the Revolution Controversy. At the same time, the poem stands in a ‘corrective’ dialogue with Thelwall’s own ‘Prefatory Memoir’ in that it offers a self-unmasking: the conjuror in the woods around Llyswen is – ‘truth to say’ – no conjuror invoking spirits but a radical driven to ground, seeking purchase on his 1790s career. While the darlings of the court are responsible for ‘cities sack’d’, ‘empires overthrown’ and ‘struggling millions doomed in chains to groan’, Thelwall identifies the gypsies with peace and humanity; the activities of their nomadic community are portrayed as no more harmful than the love charms they practiced, enabling ‘the tawny lover’ to [woo] the willing maid’ (*Poems*, p. 114). Thus, the poem both encourages and demystifies a variety of ‘occult’ acts. The Welsh maintained a certain distrust of travellers practising charms. The Rev. John Walters’ *English-Welsh Dictionary* (1794) lists a gypsy as ‘a vagabond of tawny complexion’,⁶⁴ and Suggett confirms that, under vagrancy laws, the travelling practitioner was ‘more likely to be apprehended as a vagrant than the settled conjuror or cunning-man.’⁶⁵ This

⁶⁴ Quoted in Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 85.

⁶⁵ Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales*, p. 85.

is perhaps another reason why Thelwall was so keen to identify himself with the conjuror: it implied an inhabitation, a localism (in many ways devoutly wished-for) that his 1790s unfixed, peripatetic persona, and that of the travelling vagrant-gipsy, did not. However, in the 'Epistle to Mercutio' (which initially appeared in his 1793 'politico-sentimental' topographical poem, *The Peripatetic*) Thelwall also articulates a desire to be part of a 'loquacious' community, attuned to the various environments through which they pass – a kind of peripatetic version of the Somerset community from which he had been shut out by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

It is not surprising, then, that Thelwall's poetry evinces conflict between personal and public personae. It is strikingly in evidence in his third-person memoir. This tricky portal to the poems of 1801 is itself an act of conjury: an invocation of another's voice. The rhetorical strategy conjures a sense of objective distance, legitimising the apologia offered and tempering the emotionalism of his account of the death of his daughter, Maria, which inspired the 'Parental Tears' sequence. The use of the third-person is also a political act, a comment on how his own vocalities had been edited, censored, ventriloquised, inflected, and driven into other registers and genres. Such sites of conflict between personal and public personae – so characteristic of radical discourse towards the end of the 1790s – also manifest themselves in the magical subject-matter of the volume.

There is a suggestive parallel between the reconciliation, or rather interpenetration, of public and private worlds that Thelwall had to perform in *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* and the careers and identities of late-eighteenth-century magical practitioners. While the occult signifies 'hiddenness', and the knowledge held by cunning men – often considered to be a birthright – was closely guarded by the

privileged few, they too utilised local networks and word of mouth in order to sustain their power-knowledge. Owen Davies notes that 'in their line of work it was important to be familiar with all the latest local gossip'.⁶⁶ Magical practitioners cultivated a panoptic role, keeping an attentive eye on their potential clientele, and acting as a disciplinary force once engaged by those clients. Thus the role of conjuror also bespoke the values of centrality, power, order, respect and community. Accepting the role of conjuror was a way of turning the tables on a state that had put Thelwall under surveillance – embedding himself as a necessary centre of a new community. Thelwall was profoundly drawn to the conflictions of the role.

Poems provided an opportunity for Thelwall, estranged from his metropolitan identity, to re-invent himself. Within his writing, he casts about for a range of figures to identify with, seeking various models of citation for his Welsh resurrection. The incubus-figure of Thelwall's dramatic romance 'The Fairy of the Lake' functions as an image of Thelwall's own exile and his eagerness to re-join the cultural and political currents of the age. The Incubus explains that he will soon be released from his long 'purgation' in the icy regions of Hela and that he is looking forward to 'the year of [his] regeneration' (*Poems*, p. 17). There follows a satirical song that locates the Glad Day of his emancipation as 'the young 19th Cent'ry', on whose cusp Thelwall himself is of course writing. It is an age characterised by mercantilism, gender emancipation and sexual openness: 'When no grace of the form shall in vain be bestow'd, / And nakedness' self be the tip of the mode' (*Poems*, p.18). 'The 'belles' of the new age will 'melt all the ice that now stiffens' (*Poems*, p.18) the Incubus. Racially, Thelwall figures

⁶⁶ Davies, *Popular Magic*, p. 75.

his liberation from his Welsh Hela and his re-entry into public (English) life as sexual release.

Thelwall cites Llyn Safaddan, and nearby Llangorse Lake, as the centre for a literary and political localisation of his Arthurian myth within Breconshire. To the Welsh community, however, Thelwall's title would evoke a different folk tale – their own 'local' Lady of the Lake of Llyn y Fan Fach. This tale, popularly told from childhood throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concerns the marriage of a young mortal man to the Lady of the Lake on the condition that he should not needlessly strike her three times. Their marriage was a happy one, apart from two occasions when she was admonished for crying at a wedding, and laughing at a funeral. When her careless husband accidentally struck her the third blow, she returned to the lake – leaving him heartbroken. Her descendants remained famous for their medico-occult knowledge within the nearby Carmarthenshire town Myddfai until the mid-nineteenth century. This folk tale would have been immediately identifiable with Thelwall's closet drama to a Welsh audience, and the Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach herself would have acted as a feminised model in Thelwall's own quest for self-identification. This lady of the lake is not the powerful supernatural deliverer of Arthurian myth – instead she provides a vulnerable and socially complex figure. A fish out of water, she represents the dangers of acting outside the realms of social regulation and disrupting the delicate role of socio-normative behaviour. Exiled within a world which is clearly not her own, she is a polygraph of Thelwall's conflicted Welsh identity, and the feminised model encodes an anxiety in Thelwall's failure to embody the masculine roles of father and husband/provider.

Occult Oration

Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement is a varied mix of different styles and genres: memoir, lyric and epic poetry, poetic fragment, elegy and closet drama. While generic experimentation characterised Thelwall's career before Llyswen, here one might suggest that it is also conditioned by the realities of his social and geographical displacement and his inability to settle into his Welsh environment. Periods of worry, anger, bereavement, alienation and voicelessness, and moments of confidence, hope, even power, all converge within the persona of the conjuror – an identity Thelwall uses to illustrate both his political 'defeat', and his eventual reclamation of oratorical power. I suggest the conjuror is a direct response to the 1795 Gagging Acts and the constrictions placed on freedom of speech, association and publication; at Llyswen, the political orator became a conjuror preparing to become an elocutionary theorist.

Bound up in Thelwall's experimentation with genre and voice in the volume is the issue of what can and cannot be openly said aloud. The 'Prefatory Memoir' is immediately followed by the 'The Fairy of the Lake', that strange concoction of Scandinavian lore and Arthurian dramatic romance. The verse drama is a tale of political and cultural conflict, in which the 'sorceress' Rowenna – wife of the embattled, adulterous British king Vortigen – attempts to seduce and control the British hero, Arthur. British (Welsh), Saxon, Scandinavian and supernatural powers contend with each other in a strangely hybrid allegory of 1790s revolutionary energy and reactionary regulation. Rowenna summons the freezing spirit Incubus to ensnare Arthur and his 'esquire' Tristram. The Incubus seizes Arthur's sword and leaves him powerless. Only the mysterious power of the Fairy of the Lake is able to restore his strength, and he resists Rowenna's enchantments, defeating her and marrying his true

love, Vortigen's daughter Guinevere. The romance dominates the first half of Thelwall's volume, and stands in what appears at first to be an awkward relation to the lyrical, confessional and sentimental territory of the elegiac 'Effusions' to his daughter Maria; as well as in an awkward relation to 'history' in its various cultural realignments.

Michael Scrivener sees 'The Fairy of the Lake' as championing 'the destruction of one order and the emergence of another', and describes it as 'perhaps too "Jacobin", in its celebration of the overthrow of tyrannous authority, to appeal to a conservative public'.⁶⁷ The political overtones of the work are audible in the contemporary force and political clarity of the language. Rowenna describes her workers as a 'menial herd – Mechanic instruments– / Unconscious pivots in the state machine' (*Poems*, p. 64). This is reminiscent of Burke's 'swinish multitude' and contextualises the play within a contemporary politico-linguistic debate. Moreover, the very genre of the closet-drama romance carries political meanings. It inscribes the conflict between speech (performance, action, public enunciation) and silence (reading). These are words meant to be spoken, but which are condemned to a realm of silence if they are not 'performed'. 'The Fairy of the Lake' turns on the struggle to enunciate, to vocalise, to disturb the surrounding air. The aural counter in the play is, significantly, the word 'mute' (*Poems*, p. 4) whereas the final lines of the play hail the Fairy of the Lake with the 'loudest clarion' (*Poems*, p. 92) – a trumpet with a clear sound, normally used as a call to battle. Thelwall's own intentions to break the shackles of muteness and reclaim a public voice are reflected here. The power of

⁶⁷ Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 249.

speech is illustrated by the incantations within the play, as Rowenna attributes her magical vigour to her 'minstrelsey and voice, /Obedient to my wishes' (*Poems*, p. 5). Voicelessness begets vulnerability. When the spirit Incubus freezes Tristram's words, he is rendered helpless, unable to perform his duty of warning Arthur of danger. Spells are an oratorical, performative mode to be used for evil or good, for political emancipation or ideological freezing. Words must be recited to have any consequence in the public arena, and in a literary arena the words must be spoken in order to comply with the play's interest in sonic power and rhythm. The practitioner's power lies in his ability to speak, and to know how to exploit this power in using the *right* speech.

In 'The Fairy of the Lake', the Incubus from the 'abodes of Hela' represents the freezing governmental force that Coleridge's poetic 'conversations' with Thelwall suggestively address. Judith Thompson describes the ostensibly magical, rimy weather of 'Frost at Midnight' as 'a pernicious force, an aguish killing frost that freezes honest hearts, minds and voices against feeling for others, thoughts of freedom and expressions of patriotism'.⁶⁸ Thompson contends that in 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge sympathises with Thelwall's post-revolutionary crisis as represented in his poem 'To the Infant Hampden', and answers Thelwall's cry with an acknowledgement of 'the dangers of domesticity and solitude' that similarly haunt him at Stowey (inscribed in poems such as 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison').

Thelwall's emergence post-Llswen as a speech theorist and instructor has recently claimed the attention of Romantic scholars. The precise significance of the

⁶⁸ Judith Thompson, 'An Autumnal Blast, a Killing Frost: Coleridge's Poetic Conversation with John Thelwall', *Studies in Romanticism*, 36.3 (Fall 1997), pp. 427–57, p. 438.

years spent in Wales in the development of his later elocutionary theory and practice has largely been neglected, however. Thelwall's fraught identification with the conjuror in a Welsh context is a crucial aspect of his commitment to emancipating acts of speech. Judith Thompson scrutinises the nature of the elocutionary training that Thelwall offered:

When one considers that his pupils were not only foreigners and the speech-impaired, but barristers, clergymen and aspiring members of parliament, the reformist scope of Thelwall's institute becomes clear: when he speaks of removing speech impediments and increasing the power of the voice, he is not only talking about the physiology of elocution – or rather, he is talking about elocution, but the word has more efficacious, wide-ranging and socially-meaningful implications for him.⁶⁹

The act of speaking aloud becomes a radical instrument of communication and 'co-respondent' political sociability:

According to the Thelwallian speech poetics elaborated in the lectures and essays . . . the power of poetry resides not in inspiration or composition but in the recitation (literally re-citation); not in the soul of the poet, but in the ear of the listener and in the mouth of the reader

⁶⁹ Judith Thompson, 'From Forum to Repository: A case study in Romantic Cultural Geography', *European Romantic Review*, 15.2 (June 2004), pp. 177–91, p. 187.

(who is always the speaker in turn, since for Thelwall reading always means reciting). In recitation, the reader literally co-responds with the text, taking the poet's words and making them his own, just as the poet enters into and reanimates the words and forms of his predecessors.⁷⁰

I suggest that the figure of the conjuror, with whom Thelwall identified at Llyswen, is a crucial link between the Thelwall of the late 1790s and the Thelwall of 'the young 19th Cent'ry'. Thelwall uses the multivalent cultural act of the conjuror's spell throughout *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* to register both the transformative effects of speech and the consequences of silence. His practice draws a link between physiological and societal/political restraints on speech – both of which Thelwall had of course experienced himself. Tellingly for my purposes, Thompson's essay articulates this in terms that conjure Thelwall's identity as magical-medical practitioner:

In [reciting], according to Thelwall, the reader may simultaneously heal and empower himself, overcoming his individual (and purely physiological) speech impediments, while at the same time engaging in a programme of political consciousness-raising that will prepare him to address larger, moral and social causes of speech impediment.⁷¹

This description enables a vision of Thelwall as magical healer, whose *materia medica* are the powers of enunciation-as-incantation. Thelwall cures patients of the social

⁷⁰ Thompson, 'From Forum to Repository', p. 188.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 188.

curse that is proscribed speech – a curse that could not be lifted without knowledge of the political reflex of a material occult. The poetry used by Thelwall as an instrument of vocal, and thus ideological, emancipation was also often written by Thelwall himself; his material included what Thompson describes as witty doggerel ballads ‘in which his old subversive political voices and ideas are clearly visible’.⁷² Thelwall makes his patients take possession of these words and voices, and in effect counter-charms them against the spell of freezing governmental muteness.

Rowenna claims that ‘I in lore of mystic arts excel, / And Fat’*es ambiguous book* with ease can spell’ (*Poems*, p. 29 – my emphasis). Thelwall’s 1801 collection is certainly an ‘ambiguous book’, and provides a fascinating link with 1790s debates over the implied meanings of fables and books – a leading subject broached in many political trials over the period. In a recent article, Damian Walford Davies highlights how *John Gilpin’s Ghost; or, The Warning Voice of King Chanticleer: An Historical Ballad*⁷³ – Thelwall’s autobiographical folktale involving the killing of a proud gamecock in his youth – was interpreted as ‘an imagining, in the weak sense, of the king’s death’⁷⁴ and that it had

an important role in ‘test[ing] the limits’ of the ‘hermeneutical rule’ by which the state interpreted not just libel but treason, too – the charge on which Thelwall himself would soon be brought to the bar.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ John Thelwall, *John Gilpin’s Ghost; or, The Warning Voice of King Chanticleer: An Historical Ballad* (London, 1795).

⁷⁴ John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796* (Oxford, 2000), p. 104.

⁷⁵ Damian Walford Davies, ‘Capital Crimes: John Thelwall, “Gallucide” and Psychobiography’, *Romanticism*, 18.1 (2012), pp. 55–69, p. 57.

In his fable, and throughout *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, Thelwall turns the tables on literary persecution, revealing the power of the state (and the monarchy) as nothing more than another allegorical construction. In 'The Fairy of the Lake', Thelwall reminds his readers of the equivocality of all texts, and offers them their own version of Arthur's sword, which protects against spells, illusions and Romanticism's 'necromantic frauds'. 'The Fairy of the Lake' exists as an incongruous disjunction between grand Arthurian myth and local Breconshire topography, unveiling a scepticism on Thelwall's part about the deployment of narratives and history for political gain.

Enchanted Spaces

A recently rediscovered letter to Thomas Hardy written in May 1798 highlights Thelwall's emotional struggle with political retirement: 'peaceful shades of Llyswen shelter me beneath your luxuriant foliages lull me to forgetfulness ye murmuring waters of the Wye – let me be poet farmer and fisherman – but no more politics – no more politics in this bad world'.⁷⁶ The charming bucolic setting of Llyswen caught here – the beautiful Spring weather, the promise of a quiet, self-sufficient 'philosophical existence' – identifies the honeymoon stage of the Llyswen period, before bereavement cast a shadow over his life. However, there is something unnerving about Thelwall's formula here: Llyswen's 'shades' seem somehow deathly, and the 'murmuring waters' of the Wye lull him into a trance-like forgetfulness that might turn

⁷⁶John Thelwall, 'Letter to Thomas Hardy, 24 May 1798', quoted in Walford Davies, 'Capital Crimes: John Thelwall, "Gallucide" and Psychobiography', p. 65.

to apathy, then apostasy. The physical landscape of Llyswen is seen as enunciating a dangerous natural 'spell'.

Space, as well as speech, was configured by the Thelwall of Llyswen as occult. For Anya Taylor, a space becomes 'enchanted' by means of a layering of human experience and poetical responses onto a natural landscape:

Mere nature will not always arouse the mind to visionary feats, unless it is an enchanted spot; and perhaps it becomes an enchanted spot only because it is the site of a poem.⁷⁷

Many such sites were constructed by Thelwall at Llyswen. The pre-eminent loci are those of the grave of his daughter Maria and historic Enion's tomb, which figures as frontispiece to the 1801 volume [fig. 7]. These spaces locate, in Yasmin Solomonescu's words, 'contemporary meanings in ancient legends while drawing out the communal significance of personal crisis'.⁷⁸ Such spaces of affective power are palimpsests of elegiac verse, whose cadences and phrases are repeated throughout the collection, layering the volume itself. As Taylor notes, 'these enchanted spots are repositories of layer upon layer of human experiences. They are magical because men have sunk their memories there like buried treasure'.⁷⁹ For Thelwall, these loci, whose signatures are made audible in the 'echoing Wye', become spaces of 'hidden', private knowledge and feeling. At the same time, these most personal of spaces are inescapably politicised

⁷⁷ Anya Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), p. 104.

⁷⁸ Yasmin Solomonescu, 'Mute Records and Blank Legends: John Thelwall's 'Paternal Tears'', *Romanticism*, 16.2 (2010), pp. 152–63, p. 159.

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism*, p. 104.

for Thelwall. Just as his 'Effusions' resonate with a discourse of political disquiet, so too are the spaces linked most powerfully to memory and his young daughter.

'The Fairy of the Lake' is full of 'enchanted spaces' and Thelwall asks us to accept strange proximities of worlds. Scandinavian lore is grafted onto the 'alpine fortress' of Breconshire, and other enchanted spots become localised, as 'the secret grove' (*Poems*, p. 13), and 'the cave of incantations' (*Poems*, p. 18), are placed into a direct proximity with 'Llyn Safaddan' (*Poems*, p. 31) and – significantly, 'ye twin heights / of bleak Farin[i]och' (*Poems*, p. 47). Farinioch is also mentioned in the 'Parental Tears' sequence as the site of a grieving father's 'lonely tread' (*Poems*, p. 154), and yet this silent personal space of paternal mourning is interrupted by the volume's political determinations of Arthur, who 'had hopes . . . To have poured the shout of battle' over the very same Welsh brow (*Poems*, p. 47).

Of course, Wales itself is 'othered' in *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* through the volume's English 'speech', its satirical genetics, and the cultural representations of the 'Prefatory Memoir'. Thelwall notes that:

Politics, hitherto unknown in that neighbourhood, were now injected in their most acrimonious form, into the ears of the ignorant inhabitants, in order to stimulate a vulgar hostility, more harassing and more irritating than all the open oppression of power.

(*Poems*, p. xxxvi)

As both power and private realm of secret knowledge, the occult was a defence against such 'vulgar hostility', signifying the power of the intellect (and in particular, its

issuing in vocal performance) over the brute corporeal force and the brute realities of intractable agricultural ground. Described by his contemporaries as physically unimposing, Thelwall valorises voice. He was no stranger, of course to brutal attacks before his arrival in Llyswen (*Poems*, p. xxx). It is no coincidence that the description of his bosky walks to ‘conjure evil spirits’ is immediately followed by an account of the violence offered him by a Welsh neighbour:

[S]till less would it be wondered at that he was obliged to take one of his brutal neighbours to Brecknock sessions, for ferociously assaulting him with a pick-axe; or that, during the hue and cry raised by the proclamation after Bengal Hervey, he should be obliged to defend his house from the last extremities of public outrage, by causing it to be publicly known, that he would put to death the first unauthorized individual who should presume to set foot upon his premises.

(*Poems*, p. xxxvii)

Since his public voice had been muted, Thelwall was intent on finding an identity that confirmed him in a position of strength. Thelwall’s stay in Llyswen, and the writing of *Poems*, work toward a shoring up of his own beleaguered status as a resident in the Welsh community – as father, husband, neighbour and poet. Llyswen Farm is thus fashioned as an ‘enchanted space’, a place surrounded in the above quotation by a ‘magic circle’ in which a revitalised, if thoroughly re-contextualised, ‘public’ voice (‘by causing it to be publicly known’) counters the threat of violence.

While Thelwall's cultural 'otherness' prompted him to render Welsh spaces as 'enchanted', this was an activity that worked both ways. As already noted, Thelwall recognised that the 'enchanted dormitory' of Llyswn might enthrall him into quietist submission. I view *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* as a written/spoken charm, protecting Thelwall against the soporific dangers of his Welsh exile. The irony of Thelwall's 'enchanted dormitory' is that he cannot sleep soundly. In 'To the Infant Hampden', written just before he moved his family to Llyswn, he laments his enforced peripatetic existence, as 'the tired foot, / Of persecuted Virtue cannot find, / One spray on which to rest' (*Poems*, p. 141). However, it is a 'sleepless night' that allows the composition of poetry. On reaching Llyswn, Thelwall's poetry must resist the rural charms of the place, and his oneirodynia – 'disturbed sleep, including that in which nightmares and sleepwalking occur' – leads to creativity.⁸⁰ The white-thorn that marks Maria's grave was traditionally used in folk healing as a cure for insomnia until the mid-nineteenth-century. While the temptation to have followed Maria into this familial, inactive space must have been strong, Thelwall's 1801 volume acts as a constant reminder that sleep is destructive. Arthur is overtaken by demons in 'The Fairy of the Lake' when Rowenna's somnolent spell is cast, rendering him 'viewless as impassive air' (*Poems*, p. 52). Rowenna also uses sleep-inspiring 'witchcraft' in her narcotic murder of Vortigen: 'tis done! – tis done! – The charm is bound: / Vortigen his sleep profound' (*Poems*, p. 73). While the alluring setting of the Welsh idyll seems 'charming', it is ultimately so in a darker sense, instinct with what Thompson calls 'the dangers of domesticity and solitude'. *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* is a volume

⁸⁰ 'Oneiro-, comb. Form', *OED Online* (2013), <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/131383?redirectedFrom=oneirodynia>> [accessed 7 August 2013].

of defiance. Thelwall was able to perform his position as an 'other' in Wales by imaginatively inhabiting a living material culture of conjury and cunning men. John Thelwall, self-appointed conjuror, uses poetry itself to counter-charm drowsiness and inactivity transforming it into dissident wakefulness and vociferousness.

Chapter 3: Lyrical Ballads and Occult Identities

This chapter sets out to offer readings of the 1798 volume of *Lyrical Ballads* that consider the uses to which popular magic is put as part of the avowed social and political agenda of the collection. Prominent in the discussion will be issues of class and the concept of magic as an agent of political justice. In addition, popular magic is a medium through which the reader is inducted into salutarily sceptical readings of the volume's various social exchanges and text cases, only to be regrounded in sympathy with the living operations of the material occult, not only in the lives of Wordsworth's chosen subjects, but also, tantalisingly and dislocatingly, in the lives of his middle-class readers. In other words, Wordsworth deploys popular magic as a part of a sophisticated 'maieutic' method, which 'assist[s] a person to become fully conscious of ideas previously latent in the mind'.¹ Historicist and materialist criticism has given us some thoughtful reappraisals of certain poems in *Lyrical Ballads* by offering psychological and medico-scientific readings to explain (away) certain 'supernatural' elements within the poetry, such as the cursing of Harry Gill, which is attributed to hysteria in Alan Bewell's 1986 essay 'A "Word Scarce Said": Hysteria and Witchcraft in Wordsworth's "Experimental" Poetry of 1797–1798'.² Such materialist readings emphasise the transformative abilities of words and ideas on the mind – ideas potent enough to result in 'sympathetic' physical and behavioural changes. However, I feel that these readings do not gain satisfactory purchase on Wordsworth's complex

¹ 'Maieutic, adj. and n.', *OED Online* (2013), <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/112474?redirectedFrom=maieutic>> [accessed 7 August 2013].

² Alan Bewell, 'A "Word Scarce Said": Hysteria and Witchcraft in Wordsworth's "Experimental" Poetry of 1797–1798', *English Literary History*, 53.2 (Summer 1986), pp. 357–90.

investment in material magical practice. Such psychological or psychoanalytical readings fail to go far enough.

This chapter offers a narrative of Wordsworth's search for a poetic, political and personal identity to inhabit. Popular magic acts as a vehicle for this narrative, the prime ingredient for its drama, and as a stage where these pathologies can be dramatised. These anxieties also manifest in a movement through literary form. The ballads of 1798 seek to uncover those disenfranchised members of society who were forgotten by the parental state. This chapter seeks to reveal the evolution of Wordsworth's social manifesto, not only thematically, but also in terms of form as the poet casts out for literary modes to inhabit that successfully reflect the tensions and issues pervading his thoughts at a prolific time in his career.

Lyrical Ballads 1798: A Grimoire

Recent critical readings of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* have uncovered a volume that seeks to educate its readers out of a sickly appetite for sensationalism and the Gothic. Lucy Newlyn's *Reading, Writing and Romanticism* (2000) renders 'The Thorn' a test of Wordsworth's claim in the 'Preface' to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* that 'the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and vain stimulants'.³ Wordsworth attempts to lead his middle-class readers beyond pre-Enlightenment superstitions to a more sceptical, socially attuned consciousness in which the social tragedy at the heart of Martha Ray's story is not occluded by 'localist' supernatural imaginings, but is rather brought into the clear light of day:

³ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Plymouth: Broadview Editions, 2008), p. 176.

Read in this way, 'The Thorn' may be seen as an elaborate practical application of Wordsworth's concern (voiced in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) with reforming the contemporary reader's appetite for gothic narrative . . . By implication, Wordsworth's audience is thereby reminded of the extent to which it remains steeped in the superstitions it believes to have surmounted; and is invited to become more reflective by becoming more sceptical.⁴

New Historicist critics have worked industriously to de-gothicise the supernatural elements within *Lyrical Ballads*, aligning the volume with contemporary medico-scientific advances in an attempt to bring out the volume's socio-political agendas. However, I propose that these readings, valuable as they are in revealing one vector of Wordsworth's social 'programme', only go so far. I suggest that Wordsworth commits in interesting ways to the possibilities of enchantment. *Lyrical Ballads* 1798 is a volume so bound up with surviving cultures of material occult practice that to dissolve it entirely in the service of a historicist reading neglects to ponder the ways in which so many poems in *Lyrical Ballads* refuse to allow the reader to dismiss the occult and cultivate in the reader a kind of wise passiveness or negative capability *vis-a-vis* occult enchantment.

Bewell's 'A "Word Scarce Said"' encourages us to read 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' with Wordsworth's original inspiration – Darwin's medical tract, *Zoönomia* –

⁴ Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: the Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 115.

firmly in mind. Bewell carefully negotiates gothic distractions to announce sceptically that the poem evinces an 'association (even interchangeability) between witchcraft and hysteria, one that foregrounds the powers of a strong imagination'.⁵ As a result, the ostensibly supernatural agents of *Lyrical Ballads* become nothing more than 'subjects of a study of the original workings of the imagination and its power to produce such weird forms of delirium and bodily symptoms that they might appear to be "under the dominion of spells"'.⁶ Bewell's reading works towards a kind of allegorisation of the supernatural in terms of guilt and social justice:

Harry's disease manifests a double relation. It is an accusation, and thus a projection of his own coldheartedness upon the old woman. Yet it is also a form of punishment, and thus reflects, at the level of his body, the inceptive stages of conscience and guilt, the sense that he has violated the primitive law of charity.⁷

While Bewell's argument successfully eludes sensationalist snares, it does not completely respect the poem's investment in contemporary cultures of magical practice. The reader of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is challenged by its subtitle – 'A True Story' – to consider in what forms truth lie (as it were) within the poem.

Wordsworth leaves it open for us to conclude that the truth *could* be concealed within the disenfranchised woman's perceived supernatural ability. If, as readers, we are left

⁵ Bewell, 'A "Word Scarce Said"', p. 369.

⁶ Ibid., p. 365.

⁷ Ibid., p. 372.

by the end of the poem to consider the possibility that Goody Blake is a cunning woman, we are not *wholly* educated into a compliant scepticism.

The 'truth' of *Lyrical Ballads* thus becomes far more difficult to define. 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is a poetic restaging of a case-study cited by Darwin in his *Zoönomia* (1796). Saying that he had 'very particular reasons for doing [so]', Wordsworth wrote to Joseph Cottle from Alfoxden in early March 1798, asking him to send him a copy of the medico-scientific tract 'by the first carrier'.⁸ Darwin includes the following tale in *Zoönomia* to illustrate his description of the affliction *mania mutabilis*:

A young farmer in Warwickshire, finding his hedges broke, and the sticks carried away during a frosty season, determined to watch for the thief. He lay many cold hours under a hay-stack, and at length an old woman, like a witch in a play, approached, and began to pull up the hedge; he waited till she had tied up her bundle of sticks, and was carrying them off, that he might convict her of the theft, and then springing from his concealment, he seized his prey with violent threats. After some altercation, in which her load was left upon the ground, she kneeled upon her bundle of sticks, and raising her arms to heaven beneath the bright moon then at the full, spoke to the farmer already shivering with cold, 'Heaven grant, that thou never mayest know again the blessing to be warm.' He complained of cold all the next day, and

⁸ *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787–1805*, 2nd edition, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 198–9, p. 199.

wore an upper coat, and in a few days another, and in a fortnight took to his bed, always saying nothing made him warm, he covered himself with very many blankets, and had a sieve over his face, as he lay; and from this one insane idea he kept his bed above twenty years for fear of the cold air, till at length he died.⁹

We are assured that Darwin had ‘received good information of the truth of the . . . case, which was published a few years ago in the newspapers’.¹⁰ This is tendentiously corroborated by Wordsworth in his subtitle: ‘A True Story’. In transferring the tale’s events from Warwickshire to Dorset, Wordsworth already distorts our conception of what is true. This relocation may well have been prompted by Wordsworth’s familiarity with mid-decade living conditions at Racedown, Dorset. A letter to William Mathews on 24 October 1795 describes the Dorsetshire peasantry as ‘wretchedly poor; ignorant and overwhelmed with every vice that usually attends ignorance in that class, viz – lying and picking and stealing’.¹¹ The relocation and restaging of ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’ might be read as the guilty poetic admission of a post-Godwinian Wordsworth, aware now of the hastiness, social myopia and essentialism of that comment to Mathews. Another possible prompt for Wordsworth’s Dorset restaging is the local story of Jenny Andrews of Beaminster, a town lying within 10 miles of Racedown Lodge. The story is undated, but it nevertheless provides a typical instance of the occult-as-social-weapon in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century oral

⁹ Erasmus Darwin, *Zoönomia*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Edward Earle, 1818), pp. 297–8.

¹⁰ Darwin, *Zoönomia*, p. 297.

¹¹ *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787–1805*, 2nd edition, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 153–4, p. 154.

tradition in Dorset. Rodney Legg and Olive Knott reveal that Andrews, poor and suffering from the harsh winter weather, had demanded coal from a load carried on horseback. The driver of the cart refused. The wretched woman told him that his horse would not move until she received some coal. On the driver's further refusal, his bewitched horse remained frozen to the spot until Andrews was granted her wish.¹² Wordsworth's reference in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', to the fact that 'in that county coals are dear / For they come far by wind and tide',¹³ perhaps hints at his knowledge of the local tale.

It should be recognised that fear of bewitching acted as a powerful deterrent in rural areas, Dorset and the West Country included, persisting well into the nineteenth century. Modern anthropology and social history recognise the post-Enlightenment cunning man as a profoundly influential figure of both social justice and regulatory terror. In 1825, a Somerset murder inquest lamented the psychological effect that occult regulation could exert on the individual subject. A young girl, accused of stealing, and confronted by a cunning man, drowned herself in fear of the occult practitioner's retributive power:

[W]e trust it will be a caution to many how they exhibit the scarecrow of conjuration and witchery for the purpose of extorting confessions, which, under the influence of fear, may cause their victims to 'see

¹² See Rodney Legg and Olive Knott, *Witches of Dorset*, 2nd Edition (Somerset: Dorset Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 27–8.

¹³ Wordsworth, 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', ll. 30–1.

appall'd the unreal scene' and hurry them away to acts of madness and desperation.¹⁴

In the context of the studied instabilities of the occult in *Lyrical Ballads*, the law's choice of quotation here is telling: it is from William Collins's 'Ode to Fear', (1746) which concludes with the poet actually *embracing* fear as a spur to the poetic imagination.¹⁵ By the end of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', the reader is left suspended between alternative possibilities – between, on the one hand, a post-Darwinian psychological-scientific reading that the poem confirms as overdetermined and 'sanitised' out of its original rural context, and on the other, the 'reality' – for many – of an 'unreal scene' (to quote the court's Collins). Robert Southey's review of *Lyrical Ballads* is a choice example of the conceptual cruxes forced on Wordsworth's reader by the playful ambiguities of the poem:

The story of a man who suffers the perpetual pain of cold, because an old woman prayed that he never might be warm, is perhaps a good story for a ballad, because it is a well-known tale: but is the author certain that it is 'well authenticated'? and does not such an assertion promote the popular superstition of witchcraft?¹⁶

¹⁴ 'Somerset Inquests and Murders 1825-1830', *South West England Genealogical Indexes*, <www.paulhyb.homecall.co.uk/inquests/inquests1825-1830.pdf> [accessed 23 November 2011].

¹⁵ William Collins, 'Ode to Fear', *The Poetical Works of William Collins*, ed. Alexander Dyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1827), pp. 57–9.

¹⁶ Robert Southey, 'Unsigned Review', *The Critical Review*, 24 (October 1798), pp. 197–204.

The opposition of 'well-known' and 'well authenticated' (from Wordsworth's 'Advertisement') is an interesting one – one that suggests a conflict between literary or scientific 'knowledge' and actual psychological 'experience'. I suggest the poem works ultimately to collapse the distinction. The crippling irony is that Darwin himself is guilty of both using and adding to superstitious gossip in deploying the young Warwickshire farmer's tale. The occult does not allow for a clear sceptical view or metacommentary – the only place from which we can observe it is one of inexplicability and consuming doubt. If all the other poems in *Lyrical Ballads* 1798 are, according to Wordsworth's 'Advertisement', 'either absolute inventions of the author, or facts which took place within his personal observation or that of his friends',¹⁷ then 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' becomes something ambiguously other than an 'absolute invention of the author'. Wordsworth allows us to achieve a metaperspective on the temptations of gothic sensationalism through his assiduous emphasis on social inequities and economic hardship (the price and mode of transportation of coal; the living conditions and diet of the Dorsetshire rural poor; the illegalities to which they were driven to sustain their subsistence-level lives; and the specific injunction to 'farmers' at the close of the poem). Yet the poem does not allow the reader to remain wholly in that 'politicised' field of reception: surely a part of the tale's 'truth', as advertised in the poem's subtitle, is bound up with its ability to persuade the reader of the terrifying 'reality' of supernatural power (here, as curse) for those in a particular economic situation in a precise social context. In other words, the social agenda of *Lyrical Ballads* works not only (as it does in places) by erasing the occult, but also

¹⁷ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* 1798 and 1800, p. 48.

emphatically by shoring it up as authentic experience that cannot ultimately be disproved. Described as a '*canty* [in north of England dialect, lively, brisk, active] Dame' (a phrase that would figure, by the way, in the supernatural context of *Wuthering Heights*), Goody Blake is certainly invested with some of the characteristics ascribed to her in Darwin's original version of the tale, in which the old woman is described as 'like a witch in a play'. The 'three hours' work' she accomplishes in her hut at night is left undefined (it may or may not be the 'spinning' she does in daylight hours). The cunning woman was highly (if ambiguously) respected within the community; by adopting the guise of magical practitioner Goody Blake also inherits the social acknowledgement of power inherent in that role. There is a link to be drawn between Darwin and Harry Gill. We should not be reading *Lyrical Ballads* and the stories that inspired them through a radically enlightened lens that seeks to evacuate social relations of the politically potent agency and example of the occult. By extracting the Warwickshire tale from its roots in contemporary cultures of popular magic practice, Darwin's tract – like Harry Gill himself – becomes cold, frozen in the very scepticism that *Lyrical Ballads* warns against.

The social nexus of the occult explored in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is resolutely gendered. The disenfranchised woman's association with occult power in this period would have afforded her opportunities that would have otherwise remained closed to her. Susan Wolfson attests to the division between male 'hypochondria' and female 'hysteria' (as defined by Robert Whytt¹⁸) in a secular

¹⁸ Robert Whytt, *Observations on the Nature, Causes and Cure of those Disorders which are commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac or Hysterical* (London: T. Becket and P. du Hondt, 1764).

reading of *Lyrical Ballads*. 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' requires us to keep the gender of both curser and cursed in mind:

Ostensibly a study of spooked imagination, this is also a poetry of female power and male anxiety: a man not speaking to men, but, as an effect of a woman, left muttering "to himself", death in life in a body now like hers.¹⁹

Transference of female suffering to the male body results in the occult being recognised as a political tool. What *Lyrical Ballads* explores is how this occult persona – particularly the feminised one – can be used as a political tool for the voiceless.

In 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', local gossip becomes the nexus of Goody Blake's power, ensuring a continued oral construction of fear. The opening lines introduce a whispering village culture, powered by hunger for sensationalist stories:

Oh! What's the matter? What's the matter?

What is't that ails young Harry Gill?²⁰

As a result, the tale of Goody Blake's triumph resounds through the local village, ringing in the ears of her neighbours as her story is told again and again. Harry Gill – whose social position clearly out-ranked Goody Blake's – is rendered voiceless by the experience:

¹⁹ Susan Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 130.

²⁰ Wordsworth, 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', ll. 1–2.

No word to any man he utters,
A-bed or up, to young or old;
But ever to himself he mutters,
'Poor Harry Gill is very cold'.

(‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, ll. 121–4)

Repetition of the word ‘chatter’ throughout the poem highlights the physical effects of the freezing spell, but also draws attention to the loss of speech by invoking the other meaning of the word – to talk – as Gill finds himself the subject of speech, without having his own voice heard. The only speech of which he is capable is chatter; ‘to talk rapidly, incessantly, and with more sound than sense’.²¹ His words are either unheard or unheeded, and therefore, remain ineffective in altering his situation. Harry Gill is not only trapped in the body of the suffering female; he is also resolutely bound by the social chains that have ensnared his silenced counterpart – chains that his former self helped to create and reinforce. It is important to recognise that ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’ is far more than a middle-class plea to a middle-class audience to be charitable. Of course, this is the desired outcome of the tale – but in many ways it is so much more radical than that. Wordsworth doesn’t simply encourage his middle-class readership to recognise the benefits that material occult culture lends to the disenfranchised lower classes; that would remain a patronising stance in many

²¹ ‘Chatter’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2000), <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/30971>> [accessed 7 August 2012].

respects. The poem educates the reader in social justice and in the anthropology of social relations by means of the thrill of the supernatural.

These strategies, which educated readers into a sceptical social conscience only to lay that new consciousness open to question, results in a volume of radical indeterminacy characterised by a conflict between positivist/scientific/political values on the one hand, and supernatural or metaphysical ones on the other. However, I suggest that this very ambivalence is also a political act (just as the complete evacuation of the occult or gothic has been shown to be by such critics as Newlyn). As the reader is suspended in an uncertain position between possible truths, magic becomes charged with the ability to act as a political tool for the disenfranchised poor.

The potency of language and the relationship between speech and power is an important issue throughout *Lyrical Ballads*. The occult draws these issues together. 'We are Seven' turns to a young girl, whom Wordsworth had met at Goodrich Castle on the Welsh border (itself ambiguous territory torn between 'Welshness' and 'Englishness'), to encourage the reader of *Lyrical Ballads* to be sceptical of scepticism itself. Here, words become infused with the strength to alter human perception. It is the constant repetition of the insistent 'we are seven' by the child that begins to transform the verbal reality of the poem. While the narrator may be arithmetically correct according to a certain positivist view of human existence, it is the young girl whose spell-like reverie (akin to that of Martha Ray in 'The Thorn') becomes the 'truth' of the poem. The poem's title suggests that, within the poem at least, these repeated words have become an extra-textual reality. Ultimately, this is the goal Wordsworth has set for *Lyrical Ballads* as a collection – the ability to communicate words which will eventually educate the reader out of a prejudice that may be scepticism, just as easily

as superstition. By manipulating our conception of unimaginative positivism in the poem, Wordsworth allows for an alternative version of reality (and the indeterminacy of the poems in critical debate) to come into being.

‘The Thorn’: Gossip and the Literary Marketplace

Since Newlyn’s reading of *Lyrical Ballads*, it has been assumed that in ‘The Thorn’ Wordsworth attempts to create an enlightened readership, free from ‘stupid and sickly’ gothic appetites. Read as an exercise in sceptical reading, alive to the ways in which the dramatic persona of the garrulous sea-captain ‘confesses’ his own insertion in a network of harmful gossip, and to the strategies through which the poem both invites the reader into this nexus and subtly counsels caution and independence, ‘The Thorn’ is a major contribution to the political agenda of *Lyrical Ballads*. Readerly scepticism – readerly resistance to narrative ‘authority’ – reveals the real victimhood of Martha Ray as a subject disenfranchised socially, economically and emotionally at the centre of the poem. The ‘crimes’ are not those of Martha Ray, but of the social order and of the reader who share (as Newlyn has it) ‘a potentially invasive fascination with human suffering’.²²

However, I suggest that if we completely evacuate magic from ‘The Thorn’ we also diminish Martha’s Ray’s personal and social power. An interpretation that sees Martha Ray adopt a persona of occult practitioner as a mode of social empowerment within a community riven by injustice satisfies Wordsworth’s avowed aim of having us educated out of an *unknowing* surrender to sensationalist supernatural excess. A

²² Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism*, p. 115.

network of hearsay and gossip is precisely the socio-economic fabric that enabled the magical practitioner to ply his or her business. Such a reading of 'The Thorn' has the added advantage of not allowing the reader to slip into an enervating pity for Martha Ray.

Gossip, as a powerful vehicle of the occult economy, allows for the social enfranchisement of the other. The symbiotic relationship between popular magic and cultures of community gossip may have been particularly evident to Wordsworth during his time at Somerset if Joseph Cottle's report of Wordsworth's own magical identity constructed by suspicious Somersetshire villagers is to be believed:

The wise-acres of the village it seems, made Mr. Wordsworth the object of their serious conversation. One said, that 'he had seen him wander about by night, and look rather strangely at the moon! And then, he roamed over the hills like a partridge.' Another said, he had him mutter, as he walked, in some outlandish, brogue, that nobody could understand!' Another said, 'It's useless to talk, Thomas, I think he what people call "a wise man" (a conjurer!) . . . Another said, 'However that was, he is surely a desperd French Jacobin; for he is so silent and dark that nobody ever heard him say one word about politics'. And thus these ignoramuses drove from their village a greater ornament than will ever again be found amongst them.²³

²³ Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (London: Houlston and Stone Man, 1847).

Newlyn's reading of 'The Thorn' suggests that Martha Ray is forced into victimhood by the same vicious network of condemnatory hearsay. I wish to turn this idea on its head, revealing gossip in 'The Thorn' as a nexus of power – a type of marketplace that allows Martha Ray to construct a powerful occult identity through the words of others. Like many of the other women in *Lyrical Ballads*, Martha Ray suffers at the hands of patriarchal power. Wolfson's feminist reading of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' as a poem concerned with the transference of female suffering to the male body is also useful in reading 'The Thorn'. Martha Ray's repeated cry of 'oh misery, oh misery' is not only repeated by the forlorn woman herself, but also by the sea captain as he tells his audience the tale – and by every other person who relays the plight of the poor woman within the extended network of gossip that surrounds her. This transference of speech – the appropriation of Martha Ray's words by other villagers – is a sort of literary possession. In the same way that Goody Blake is able to make Harry Gill to feel the suffering chills of a poor old woman, whenever those words are repeated their speaker feels something of the suffering that plagues Martha Ray. There is no indication that in disseminating her suffering her own pain decreases – in much the same way that there is no assumption that Goody Blake would have been warm having made Harry Gill feel cold – but it does become an infectious, enlightening diffusion of social awareness and knowledge.

Martha's repeated reverie, 'Oh misery! oh misery!' becomes a spell. In the same vein as Thelwall's 'echoing Wye', she constructs an enchanted space through a palimpsest of human emotion and suffering – a territory wrought by occult symbols such as the twisted, knotty thorn. As Toby R. Benis has argued, Martha Ray occupies a unique social position; she is 'both community member and mysterious wanderer,

both neighbour and alien. Like the thorn, pond, and moss heap, she defies easy classification'.²⁴ Martha Ray's reputation as 'other' ensures her freedom. The gossipy local villagers cry for their version of justice:

And some had sworn an oath that she
Should be to public justice brought . . .²⁵

However, they also fear her, to the extent that the sea-captain warns that 'You must take care and choose your time' ('The Thorn', l. 68) when approaching the mountain so as not to risk contact with her:

I never heard of such as dare
Approach the spot when she is there.

('The Thorn', ll. 103–10)

The poem is continually aware of its own cartography, and involves itself in the act of carving out the space that Martha Ray has been able to commandeer using the power that the occult persona that has been inflicted on her allows. The narrator might not be able to tell his audience exactly why she weeps ('I cannot tell') however, as Andrew Bennett argues in his essay 'Wordsworth's Poetic Ignorance', (2010) he holds far more specific knowledge than his claim at first suggests: 'Of course. The speaker knows

²⁴ Toby R. Benis, *Romanticism on the Road: The Marginal Gains of Wordsworth's Homeless* (Basingstoke: Macmillain Press, 2000), p. 95.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, 'The Thorn', *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter (Plymouth: Broadview Editions, 2008), pp. 103–10, ll. 231–2.

some things, knows them only too well: he's good, notoriously good, on measurements in particular'.²⁶ Indeed, the narrator is able to give exact details about the physical topography of Martha Ray's thorn bush:

Not five yards from the mountain-path,
This thorn you on your left espy;
And to the left, three yards beyond,
You see a little muddy pond
Of water, never dry;
I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.

(*'The Thorn'*, ll. 27–33)

Engaged in the act of mapping, the narrator is able to give precise measurements of the pond, and yet the pull of local gossip leads him only to conclude that the mound that lies nearby is 'like an infant's grave in size' (*'The Thorn'*, l. 52). The mound is 'as like as like can be' (*'The Thorn'*, l. 53), but the stark contrast to the exacting proportions drawn of the pond exposes the shortcomings of 'likeness'. By calling out her woeful paternoster, and carefully enticing the villagers' superstitious curiosity, Martha Ray constructs her own territory. This does not condemn her to isolation – instead it grants her privacy, protecting her from the harangues of society. She has

²⁶ Andrew Bennett, 'Wordsworth's Poetic Ignorance', *Wordsworth's Poetic Theory: Knowledge, Language, Experience*, ed. Alexander Regier and Stefan H. Uhlig (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 19–35, p. 28.

taken possession of that enchanted space through her echoing words and symbols of the occult: the thorn-bush and the mysterious mound.

Forsaken Indian/British Women

The remainder of this chapter seeks to investigate two more of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* concerning disenfranchised women: 'The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman' and 'The Mad Mother'. Brett and Jones's 1991 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* identify 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', 'The Ancient Mariner', and 'Peter Bell' as belonging to a cycle of 'curse poems'.²⁷ However, I offer an alternative taxonomy that sees 'The Complaint' and 'The Mad Mother', along with 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' and 'The Thorn', as a nexus of 'spell poems'. I argue that these four poems were written in dialogue with each other, yet take very different forms – 'The Complaint', a dramatic monologue; 'The Thorn', another dramatic monologue, but from the perspective of a loquacious narrator with interruptions from Martha Ray in the form of her haunting refrain; 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', a traditional ballad; and 'The Mad Mother', which is a dramatic monologue manqué, hybridised by the presence of the initial stanza, told from an external perspective. I will argue that Wordsworth's choice to experiment with form in a group of poems that are intended to be read together is interestingly bound up in the poems' investments in popular magic, alerting the reader to the human suffering that compels disenfranchised individuals to adopt occult identities.

²⁷ *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 270.

‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, ‘The Thorn’ and ‘The Mad Mother’ are poems concerned with the casting of spells by disenfranchised women in response to their social marginalisation within rural English communities. ‘The Complaint’, meanwhile, taken directly from Samuel Hearne’s exploration narratives following his expeditions to the Northwest Passage, is seemingly out of place in a collection that deals predominantly with rural English cultural contexts and topographies.²⁸ Despite the contextual relevance of conjuring in its source material, magic is completely evacuated from ‘The Complaint’, making it a spell poem manqué (to use that word again), characterised by the notable absence of popular magic where we are led to anticipate it. I seek to argue that the intentions behind this evacuation were twofold. Firstly, the elision of the sensationalist superstition that had become synonymous with colonial cultures (owing largely to travel narratives such as Hearne’s) allows an opportunity for the forsaken woman to escape the subjective colonialist gaze – a perspective that allows us to recognise her plight as one of human suffering, rather than as belonging to any one specific race. Secondly, in evacuating magic from colonial contexts (where readers familiar with Hearne would have come to expect – even desire – it), Wordsworth focuses attention on the presence of magic *specifically on English ground*.

In order to negotiate the complex transatlantic dynamics of *Lyrical Ballads* in terms of Wordsworth’s investment in popular magic, it is necessary to read ‘The Complaint’ alongside ‘The Mad Mother’. This poem, I argue, acts as a poised fulcrum between the poems focused on English ground and the North American context of

²⁸ Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort in Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean in the Years 1769, 1770, 1771, and 1772*, ed. J. B. Tyrrell (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1911).

'The Forsaken Indian Woman'. As I will suggest, the fascinatingly (and ambiguously) transatlantic character of the speaker – a hybrid of English and North American cultures – faces abandonment in an English landscape and is forced to embrace an occult identity in her search for enfranchisement. While the reader may expect the mad mother to be associated with the forsaken Indian woman, owing to their (inferred) common North American roots, her status as possible magical practitioner aligns her with Goody Blake and Martha Ray. Again, Wordsworth's deployment of popular magic in 'The Mad Mother' is twofold; reading the poem alongside 'The Thorn' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' reveals a further layer of complexity to Wordsworth's deployment of popular magic in his spell poems. In 'The Mad Mother' we witness local gossips construct an 'occult' persona for a disenfranchised woman, who takes ownership of the identity thrust upon her in order to maintain a measure of autonomy and self-definition as a feared (and thus ambiguously empowered) individual. However, when read in the transatlantic context of 'The Complaint', the very survival of popular magic is revealed to be symptomatic of a community that does not satisfactorily care for the impoverished, elderly or sick. If the social systems had been in place adequately to protect the women in Wordsworth's spell poems, they would have no need to turn to occult identities as a means of empowerment. The same systems of superstition and reliance on conjury survived on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the Romantic period, throwing into the relief the irony behind the claims made by English readers of travel writing such as Hearne's, who condemned North American systems of superstition as uncivilised barbarity. The transatlantic dynamic of popular magic in *Lyrical Ballads* calls for a reconsideration of what constitutes 'modernity' in a 'civilised' community.

‘The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Women’: A Spell Poem Manqué

Like ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’, the core scenario of Wordsworth’s ‘The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman’ is identified as factual by an accompanying prefatory statement.²⁹ ‘The Complaint’, however, is the only poem in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* that explicitly cites a source as a prelude to the text – Samuel Hearne’s *Journey from Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean* (1795) – which Wordsworth had read ‘with deep interest’ while at Alfoxden in 1798.³⁰ Hearne’s depiction of the practice of abandoning the sick or elderly when they began to halt the progress of the travelling Northern Indian tribes provides the prompt for Wordsworth’s poem:

One of the Indian’s wives, who for some time had been in a consumption, had for a few days past become so weak as to be incapable of travelling, which, among those people, is the most deplorable state to which a human being can possibly be brought. Whether she had been given over by the doctors, or that it was for want of friends among them, I cannot tell, but certain it is, that no expedients were taken for her recovery; so that, without much ceremony, she was left unassisted, to perish above-ground.³¹

Hearne’s text (published posthumously in 1796) provides a detailed, and often sympathetic, account of the cultures, beliefs and practices of the Northern Indians he

²⁹ William Wordsworth, ‘The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman’, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 151.

³⁰ *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (Penrith: Humanities E-Books, 2008), p. 54.

³¹ Hearne, *Journey*, pp. 218–9.

had encountered during the course of three expeditions undertaken between 1769 and 1772. Hearne's initial expedition lasted only a month (November–December 1769), and the second (February–November 1770) was cut short when his quadrant was damaged. The final, and longest, was a nineteen-month expedition from Hudson Bay to the mouth of the Coppermine River from December 1770 to June 1772, in search of the Northwest Passage. During the third expedition, Hearne was accompanied by a group of Chipewyan Indians, including their chief, Matonabee. In *Romantic Indians* (2006), Tim Fulford contends that while the intentions of the Hudson Bay Company were commercial rather than colonial, Hearne's text contributed to a wider colonial narrative which, along with other accounts of travel or exploration produced during the period, were all 'products of Empire'.³²

Key to Hearne's depiction of Chipewyan culture (and that of other groups of Dene peoples) was the central, multivalent role that conjurors – Hearne's own term – played in their communities. Healers and legislators, they assumed almost divine status within the social group. Hearne's representation of these figures is ambiguous. While he was keen not to offend his Chipewyan hosts by openly voicing his suspicions regarding the conjurors' claims to genuine supernatural ability, he was scrupulous in seeking to establish himself as a rational observer. Observing the supposed healing properties of ceremonial sword-swallowing, for instance, Hearne states: 'I am not so credulous as to believe that the conjurer absolutely swallowed the bayonet', identifying the ceremony as 'a very nice piece of deception', a display of legerdemain.³³ His text demystifies this healing ceremony as having no supernatural

³² Tim Fulford, *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture 1756-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 60.

³³ Hearne, *Journey*, p. 193.

agency, and even provides an explanation of how the swallowing trick is achieved using a purpose-built device (similar to those that would have been used by British stage magicians or sharpers). Hearne records that his scepticism was met with laughter from the tribesmen on account of his 'ignorance, as they were pleased to call it'; it was explained to him that 'the spirits in waiting swallowed, or otherwise concealed, the stick'.³⁴ Hearne's description of the Indians as a 'poor deluding and deluded people' identifies what he sought to reveal as a cycle of imposition and superstitious belief in which both conjuror and those he serviced were victims.

However, Hearne also reports the seemingly miraculous cures that sometimes followed these ceremonies. While he may not have believed that this was owing to any supernatural agency, he was 'at a loss to say' how the spells worked psychologically in the minds and imaginations of the inflicted to the extent that it had a physical, curative effect on the body:

Though the ordinary trick of these conjurers may be easily detected, and justly exploded, being no more than the tricks of common jugglers, yet the apparent good effect of their labours on the sick and diseased is not so easily accounted for. Perhaps the implicit confidence placed in them by the sick may, at times, leave the mind so perfectly at rest, as to cause the disorder to take a favourable turn; and a few successful cases are quite sufficient to establish the doctor's character and reputation.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

The Chipewyan people who accompanied Hearne came to believe that the explorer – a mysterious outsider – also possessed magical abilities. Hearne notes that Matonabee had approached him to curse one of his enemies. Keen to avoid insulting his guide, Hearne drew a picture of himself piercing the breast of Matonabee's rival with a bayonet. The following year, Matonabee was pleased to report that his victim 'was in perfect health when he heard of [Hearne's] design against him; but almost immediately afterwards became quite gloomy, and refusing all kind of sustenance, in a very few days died'.³⁶ This success strengthened Hearne's reputation among the Chipewyan tribe, and he took advantage of this perceived occult identity to '[keep] them in awe and in some degree of respect and obedience'.³⁷ As Fulford has revealed, Hearne did not immediately achieve a position of superiority and control over the natives. Isolated from the support of military and bureaucratic British infrastructures in the far North, and dependent on the knowledge of his Chipewyan guides for survival, 'Hearne not only found that he could not, in fact assume command as, in theory, he was supposed to do'.³⁸ One reason for this, Fulford argues, is that 'there was no stable authorized position for Hearne, no easy access to a discourse in which the relationship of colonizer to colonized, white to native, was already determined'.³⁹ Without this established colonial dynamic in place, Hearne was forced to rely on the same systems of fear and superstition on which the Indian conjurors themselves relied in order to achieve a measure of control and respect among the Dene people.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 221.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 69.

³⁹ Ibid.

Considering the central role played by Indian conjurors in the poem's cited source material, it is surprising that no mention is made of magic in 'The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman'. What one might term the evacuation of magic in 'The Complaint' is all the more unexpected given the context of the poem's source material and the poem's inclusion in a volume invested in curses, spells and the psychological effects of a belief in magic. The consequence of this absence in 'The Complaint' tendentiously conspires to locate a reliance on cultures of popular magic *on British ground*. I argue that Wordsworth draws British and Indian communities, and the place of popular magic in the ecology of their folk cultures, into a problematic alignment (as I hope to demonstrate in my reading of 'The Mad Mother'). In doing so, Wordsworth undermines self-congratulatory readings of texts such as Hearne's – readings in which superstition could readily be taken to be the mark of a benighted primitivism.

As Tim Fulford has shown, Hearne's idealisation of the resourcefulness of a Dog-ribbed Indian woman he encountered in January 1772 – a woman who had been taken prisoner by a rival tribe of Athapuscow Indians in 1770, but who had escaped and survived alone in a hut she had constructed to protect her from the winter elements – identifies her as “romantic” in her ability to dwell at one with nature, surviving in what seems to be the harshest of environments'.⁴⁰ The Indian men who fought among themselves to claim her valued the woman only insofar as she represented a trophy to be won by the strongest of her suitors. Hearne, meanwhile, admired her only 'as he would a natural object, solely for a vicarious emotional experience'.⁴¹ Thus, 'the white explorer's aesthetic sensibility (and those of his

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 172.

⁴¹ Ibid.

readers) demonstrates his moral superiority: he is more chivalrous and paternalistic than the woman's own menfolk' and the 'singular relationship' between the lone woman and the white explorer works to identify British colonialism as benevolent patriotism.⁴² Contemporary reviews of Hearne's *Journey* suggest that this view was shared by Hearne's readers. *The Monthly Review* of June 1796 celebrated Hearne's account as a valorisation of the benefits of a civilised social order:

It contains, in a plain unadorned style, such a striking picture of the miseries of savage life, accompanied with so many minute incidents copied faithfully from nature, that it is impossible to read it without feeling a deep interest, and without reflecting on, and cherishing, the inestimable blessings of civilised society.⁴³

Further, *The Critical Review* of June 1797 praised Hearne's account of the Native Indians as a salutary corrective to the unthinking Rousseauian admiration of the 'noble savage':

Our ears are repeatedly stunned with the praises of savage life: and the admirers of the state of nature, as it is foolishly called, take pleasure in contrasting the defects of civilisation with the little solid comfort to be found in their favourite state of independence.⁴⁴

⁴² Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 172.

⁴³ *The Monthly Review*, (June 1796), p. 327.

⁴⁴ *The Critical Review or, Annals of Literature*, 20 (June 1797), p. 127.

The British reader of texts such as Hearne's is led to regard Indian culture in British North America with Enlightenment condescension; the Northern Indian reliance on magic played a central role in this depiction of savage life.

There is, however, an uncanny familiarity between Hearne's account of colonial magic and the folk practices that continued to be utilised by cunning men in Britain. For instance, as Hearne records, Dene conjurors deployed a range of techniques to cure sick members of their community:

Several of the Indians being very ill, the conjurers, who are always the doctors, and pretend to perform great cures, began to try their skill to effect their recovery. Here it is necessary to remark, that they use no medicine either for internal or external complaints, but perform all their cures by charms. In ordinary cases, sucking the part affected, blowing, and singing to it; haughing, spitting, and at the same time uttering a heap of unintelligible jargon, compose the whole process of the cure.⁴⁵

Thomas Hancock's 'History of Llanrhaiadr-yn-Mochnant' (written in 1873, but recording Romantic-period practices) notes the practice of 'swyno'r ryri' – a Montgomeryshire charm for curing shingles: 'the charmer breathed gently on the inflamed part, and then followed a series of little spittings around it'.⁴⁶ In addition,

⁴⁵ Hearne, *Journey*, p. 133.

⁴⁶ Thomas Hancock, 'History of Llanrhaiadr-yn-Mochnant', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, (1877), vol. vi, p. 327. A footnote to the text reveals that 'the writer remembers being himself, when a child of eight years old, submitted to the operation of the charm, and a cure ensured without the use of any other means!' Hancock (writing in 1873) attests that 'these charms have become extinct in this parish many years ago' – yet, as the charm had been practised within living memory, this suggests that it is likely to have been observed in the Romantic period.

Hearne reported that the Northern Indian conjurors were also feared as the tribe believed they were capable of malign, as well as benign, magic:

When these jugglers take a dislike to, and threaten a secret revenge on any person, it often proves fatal to that person; as, from a firm belief that the conjuror has power over his life, he permits the very thought of it to prey on his spirits, till by degrees it brings on a disorder which puts an end to his existence.⁴⁷

Of course, the fear that some individuals had the ability to deploy supernatural forces to curse or bewitch others was not unique to Northern Indian cultures. The same fears were observed on the opposite side of the Atlantic as British communities throughout the Romantic period continued to believe that witches could cause bodily harm to their victims as a result of 'ill wishes' – evidenced by the continued employment of and reliance on cunning folk in order to combat or protect against malign magic.

'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman' is a poem seemingly out of place in the context of a volume that explores the lives of marginalised and disenfranchised British subjects. The speaker of the dramatic monologue is clearly identified as culturally other in the title and preface to the poem. However, in the poem itself, her racial identity becomes a secondary concern.⁴⁸ Debbie Lee has argued that 'what Wordsworth did not want was to drag readers through stereotypical experiences' in 'The Complaint' as that would only crystallise 'mere fixed categories of otherness'

⁴⁷ Hearne, *Journey*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ See Maureen M. McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 45.

incapable of prompting 'sympathy beyond themselves'.⁴⁹ Wordsworth denies readers the opportunity to read 'The Complaint' in the same way in which they would voyeuristically consume travel narratives such as Hearne's. Fulford argues that Wordsworth 'gives his Indian woman a psychological complexity that is absent from Hearne's portraits'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Wordsworth's focus on the human emotions linked to motherhood, tribal bonds, wavering stoicism and incipient despair ensures that the poem escapes the frame of imperialist anthropology and dramatises universal human suffering. Further, 'The Complaint' by no means advocates a simplistic idealisation of Northern Indian tribes; after all, the Indian woman oscillates between acceptance, regret and anger. However, it is clear that Wordsworth presents us with a figure whose emotional depth extends beyond the (already stale) popular representations of savage independence.

The reader of *Lyrical Ballads* may well expect the transatlantic dynamic of the volume to bring into direct alignment the modes of superstition operating in both contemporary North American and British cultures. However, there is no suggestion that any magical healing practice has been attempted in the hope of curing the Indian woman's consumptive illness. As already noted, this is surprising considering the several detailed descriptions of such Chipewyan healing conjury recorded in the poem's source material. Nor is there any suggestion that the Indian woman feared she may have been 'conjured to death' – a belief commonly held among the Dene (as among British subjects who believed witchcraft to be the root cause of unexplained illness, as we have seen). 'When any of the principal Northern Indians die', Hearne

⁴⁹ Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 198.

⁵⁰ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 174.

records, 'it is generally believed that they are conjured to death, either by some of their own countrymen, by some of the Southern Indians, or by some of the Esquimaux'.⁵¹

While it may be true that, as Fulford has argued, the forsaken Indian woman gains 'a certain power' as she 'sing[s] out [her] own interpretation of [her] bodily distress', that song is negotiated differently from the spells in *Lyrical Ballads*.⁵² Wordsworth's choice of poetic form is significant here. Wordsworth's 'spell poems' are mediated through (unreliable) narrators, and the reader is made constantly aware of circulating networks of local gossip within the poems. 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is delivered by a ballad narrator. 'The Thorn' is a dramatic monologue, told by a superstitious commentator, not by Martha Ray herself. As Wordsworth's advertisement of 1798 revealed, 'The Thorn' is 'not supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently show itself in the course of the story'.⁵³ In 1800, this note was expanded, revealing the narrator as

A Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired . . . to some village or country town of which he was not a native . . . Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence; and from the same cause, and other predisposing causes . . . are prone to superstition.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Hearne, *Journey*, p. 321.

⁵² Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 178.

⁵³ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 331

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.331-2.

Both 'The Thorn' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' clearly demonstrate their protagonists' insertion in circulating discourses of hearsay as women who have been identified by their superstitious communities as having magical powers – in particular the power to curse. In 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', for instance, the narrator reveals that 'the neighbours tell, and tell you truly' about the effects of Goody Blake's spell on Harry Gill. The loquacious narrator of 'The Thorn' also refers to tales told by village gossips: 'I've heard many swear' and 'some will say' become the persona's narratorial, rhetorical and psychological crutches.⁵⁵ The communal (almost to the point of chronic) re-telling of these tales works as a spell to intensify superstitious belief in the minds of the local community, and in the process the women are granted a potential platform for empowerment and self-definition. The poems dramatise and enact the networks of gossip that practitioners of popular magic manipulated in order to advertise their services. As noted in Chapter 1, cunning folk relied on the circulation of tales concerning their supernatural abilities in order to increase their influence on the minds and imaginations of the credulous. The vital role played by the community itself in constructing and repeatedly confirming the power and identity of an occult practitioner accounts for the importance accorded to the crucial relation between a spell being audibly articulated and being heard – a vital component in Wordsworth's spell poems. Goody Blake's curse, for instance, is effective only once 'Young Harry heard what she had said'.⁵⁶ Martha Ray's enunciation ('Oh misery! oh misery!') becomes a sort of incantation, heard and compulsively echoed by the narrator and his

⁵⁵ 'The Thorn', l. 173; l. 214.

⁵⁶ Wordsworth, 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', l. 103.

fellow gossips in 'The Thorn', which, as argued earlier in this chapter, affords the mysterious woman a certain level of empowerment. The *social* aspect of these poems' narrative forms (communal ballad, vocally layered dramatic monologue) is key to the construction of an occult identity for these characters. At the same time, it also functions to demonstrate the enforced marginalisation and isolation of these disenfranchised characters *from* these communities.

'The Complaint' is also a dramatic monologue. The poem is unique among Wordsworth's portrayals of disenfranchised women in that the female's story is not mediated through a gossipy narrator or superstitious community. Rather, the dramatic monologue serves the function of confirming the removal of the forsaken Indian woman from all social transactions. Even the most natural interpersonal connection – the bond between a mother and child – is severed as the forsaken Indian woman is separated from her infant son. Without the presence of a framing narrative voice, the reader is allowed direct and interrupted access to the Indian woman's physical and psychological crisis. This exclusion from a wider community also enables the complete elision of superstition and magic in 'The Complaint'. The uninterrupted dramatic monologue is free from the perspective of a British commentator whose European idealisation-and-implicit-simplification of the Northern Indian woman may well have buried her physical and psychological suffering within his colonialist assumptions concerning 'uncivilised' cultures. We of course know from Hearne that the Dene peoples relied on the conjuror's art, but the context of North American magic is elided from the poem itself. Hearne is invoked in the epitext to 'The Complaint' as a type of Wordsworthian gossipy narrator; this, however, only intensifies the absence of sensationalist depictions of North American cultures within the poem itself. This not

only allows Wordsworth's reader to focus on the suffering of the forsaken woman without being preoccupied by sensationalist invocations of Northern Indian superstition; it also, I argue, focuses attention on the cultures of popular magic existing specifically on British ground.

'The Mad Mother': Transatlantic Negotiations of Popular Magic

'The Mad Mother' uniquely internalises both sides of the transatlantic investments of *Lyrical Ballads* and takes its place alongside 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' and 'The Thorn' as part of a triad of 'spell poems' about superstitious English rural communities and the disenfranchised women who are forced to turn to popular magic in order to attain a measure of empowerment. Goody Blake and Martha Ray are individuals who, finding themselves at the centre of local hearsay, embrace the occult identities constructed for them by the sensationalist, and male, desires of the gossipy community of which they are part, but from which they are also estranged. Taking ownership of their ambiguous status as 'other' allows for a measure of freedom and emancipation that might be otherwise unattainable given their impoverished status. Wordsworth's spell poems, I argue, draw attention to human suffering, albeit necessarily veiled by a sensationalist fascination with or fear of popular magic. 'The Mad Mother' shares these characteristics.

While it is identifiable as a spell poem, 'The Mad Mother' gains layers of complexity from its transatlantic hybridities. 'The Complaint' is not the only lyrical ballad to feature an Indian woman. 'The Mad Mother' 'is also about a woman who is –

or may be – a Native American’.⁵⁷ She ‘came far from over the main’ and she speaks of constructing an ‘Indian bower’.⁵⁸ John Kenyon’s criticism of the explicit specification that the mad mother’s song was ‘in the English tongue’ (‘is not this’, Kenyon asked, ‘in an English poem, superfluous?’) – was answered by Wordsworth in a letter of 1836:

Though she came from far, English was her native tongue – which shows her either to be of these Islands, or a North American. On the later supposition, while the distance removes her from us, the fact of her speaking our language brings us at once into closer sympathy with her.⁵⁹

As Fulford suggests, the mad mother evades being easily identified as belonging to any specific race.⁶⁰ Exposure to the elements has altered her appearance to an extent that makes it difficult to determine her race; her ‘coal-black hair’ is ‘burnt’ by the sun and her cheek, that would otherwise be ‘pale and wan’ is ‘brown’.⁶¹ This ethnic ambiguity ensures her status as transatlantic hybrid – Wordsworth does not allow his reader to dismiss her crisis as belonging to any one specific race, in an extension of the project at work in ‘The Complaint’.

The mad mother (like the forsaken Indian woman) may have been partly derived from Hearne’s depiction of abandoned Indian women. In *Romantic Indians*, Fulford argues that Wordsworth’s reconstruction of the abandoned Dog-ribbed Indian

⁵⁷ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 175.

⁵⁸ William Wordsworth, ‘The Mad Mother’, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 2005), ll. 4, 55.

⁵⁹ William Wordsworth, *Letters of William Wordsworth Later Years* ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), vol. 2, p. 812.

⁶⁰ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 175.

⁶¹ Wordsworth, ‘The Mad Mother’, ll. 2, 68.

woman witnessed by Hearne – identifiable by the baby bundled in her arms – comes to represent ‘both a pitiable victim of male-governed Indian society and a sublime other’ that is ‘admirably alien’ – an indigenous state to which all of Wordsworth’s rural women aspire:

Freedom in nature reaches its apogee in an individual difference from civilisation experienced as an embrace of otherness. The language of rural life, it seems, is at its most authentically experienced when spoken by a woman who is embracing alienation or oblivion.⁶²

In ‘The Complaint’, the emotional and psychological complexity extended to Wordsworth’s reclamation of Hearne’s idealised Indian woman ensures that, as readers, we are ‘left in an emotional quandary as to our relationship with her (and with other people of markedly different cultures)’.⁶³

While ‘The Mad Mother’ may concern another Native American woman (or, as Fulford has it, a woman who is ‘marked by Indianness’) facing abandonment, her case is crucially different from that of the forsaken Indian woman. It is clear that instead of traversing the inhospitable landscapes of northern Canada faced by the forsaken Indian woman, the mad mother is isolated in the topography of the West Country. The Fenwick note records that ‘the subject was reported to [Wordsworth] by a lady of Bristol who had seen the poor creature’.⁶⁴ Despite suggestions of the mad mother’s

⁶² Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 178.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶⁴ Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes*, p. 11. Jared Curtis has noted that the Lady of Bristol may have been Mrs. John Estlin, whose encounter is mentioned in Coleridge’s notebooks – ‘Mrs. Estlin’s story of the Maniac who walked round and round’. This entry possibly relates to an earlier note in Coleridge’s notebook,

Northern Indian ethnic identity, her situation and crisis are, within the complex cultural, gender and geographical ecologies of the *Lyrical Ballads*, more readily associated with the English Martha Ray than with the forsaken Indian woman.

There are several textual parallels between 'The Mad Mother' and 'The Thorn'.⁶⁵ Both are tales of possible infanticide following the abandonment of a woman and child by a patriarchal figure – inspired, in part, by the Scottish ballad 'Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament', which Wordsworth had read in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765). Social pressures are at the very heart of both Martha Ray's and the mad mother's crises. Both are abandoned by the fathers of their children, and both are plagued by the stigma that accompanies their status as mothers of illegitimate children and, one might suggest, by post-partum madness. The motivation behind the father's disappearance in 'The Mad Mother', however, is ambiguous. While the protagonist of 'Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament' is the victim of abuse at the hands of the child's 'cruel father',⁶⁶ the mad mother suggests that her lover may have been forced to abandon her having being forced into poverty ('He poor man! is wretched made').⁶⁷ It is also possible that the mother has been widowed; the mother suggests that 'We'll find thy father in the wood', where, it may be suggested, she will kill both herself and the child in an effort to be reunited with him. The mother's motivations

'A maniac in the woods--
She crosses (heedlessly) the woodman's path--
Scourg'd by rebunding boughs--'

See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 6 vols (London: Routledge, 1957-73), I, #260 and #230.

⁶⁵ Wordsworth would acknowledge his debt to Percy in the 1815 'Essay Supplement to the *Lyrical Ballads*', *Poems by William Wordsworth, Including Lyrical Ballads* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1815), pp. 362-3.

⁶⁶ Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1794), vol. III, pp. 197-9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I. 78.

are profoundly ambiguous; does she mean her child harm, or does she seek to protect him from the suffering that accompanies their impoverishment? Whatever the case (and the ambiguity is irresolvable), the absence of any social system that adequately succours them ensures that the mad mother and her child are driven to the very margins of her community.

The mother's madness is characterised by the protective – to the point of obsessive – relationship she has with her baby (whose presence, if not precisely its continued existence, is noted in the initial stanza). The bond is so intense that the conventional dynamic between mother and child collapses, resulting in the mother's constant oscillation between needing and being needed by her son. This intense maternal relationship problematically excludes all others, and therefore 'what seems like insanity may be a maternal love so intense that it prefers an "Indian" life beyond society, sheltered by nature'.⁶⁸ The ambiguity surrounding the mother's lunacy and her crimes (either those she has committed, or is yet to commit) means that we are unable easily to identify her as either moral or immoral, victim or villain – just as we are unable definitively to categorise her culturally or racially. As Fulford argues, 'we are left unsure whether to admire her as a loving 'Indian' at one with nature, or to pity (and fear) her as an unhinged obsessive . . . We cannot either dismiss her as a lunatic or idealize her as a noble savage'.⁶⁹ The 'Indianness' of Wordsworth's alienated women has been read as indicative of their freedom in nature – an indigenous state achieved when such marginalised individuals embrace their otherness in the face of distress.⁷⁰ While Wordsworth's women can certainly be seen to gain power in their

⁶⁸ Fulford, *Romantic Indians*, p. 176.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-8.

'otherness' when faced with isolation or madness, I suggest that this formulation can be extended: the mad mother, like the other disenfranchised females of Wordsworth's spell poems, achieves definition and voice through an *occult* identity, enabled by the superstitious, Gothic desires of the communities from which they are exiled, but in relation to whose living occult economies they achieve their significance. That the mad mother is more readily associated with the English Martha Ray suggests that her reliance on superstition as a means of empowerment during times of desperation is not an exclusive marker of cultures 'other' to Britain.

Both female protagonists are anxiously regarded by the community from which they have been exiled as being dangerously 'mad' and are feared as potentially witch-like figures. Martha Ray is said to have the power to curse any individual who dares to encroach on her territory ('I never heard of such as dare / Approach the spot when she is there').⁷¹ The apprehensive tone of village gossip surrounding the mad mother is registered as a descant to the mother's pleas to her son to 'have no fear of me', despite the tales he may overhear, for 'I cannot work thee any woe'.⁷² The mad mother's insertion in a network of village gossip is less overt than in 'The Thorn', owing largely (as I will argue) to the difference in poetic form. However, the opening stanza of the poem – the only one not articulated by the mother herself – alerts the reader to the presence of other perspectives. From the mother's claims that '*they* say that I am mad' and her pleas to her infant son to 'dread not *their* taunts', the reader is led to infer that she (like Martha Ray and Goody Blake) is the subject of circulating, sensationalist hearsay.⁷³ While most of the mad mother's song is addressed directly to

⁷¹ 'The Thorn', ll. 98-9.

⁷² Wordsworth, 'The Mad Mother', l. 16; l.20.

⁷³ Ibid., l. 11; l. 71 (italics mine).

the child she carries in her arms, the occasional, psychologically satisfying, slippage into the third person ('I'll teach *him* how the owlet sings') suggests that she may well have been aware that their conversation is not entirely private. She is certainly aware of the gossip concerning her madness and the illegitimacy of her child.

Thus unlike the forsaken woman in 'The Complaint' (who is entirely removed from any sort of human interaction), it is clear that as she wanders, the mad mother's talk and song are overheard. The narrator, after all, is able to identify her as speaking 'in an English tongue'. If we are to read 'The Mad Mother' through the same lens as 'The Thorn', the inferred gossip that circulates among this (almost absent) intra-poetic audience offers a potential for the same freedoms that are extended to Martha Ray. She proclaims a relationship with nature that transcends the limits of mortal bounds ('The high crag cannot work me harm, / Nor leaping torrents when they howl') and claims to 'know the poisons of the shade'. What is truly concealed inside the bundle the mother carries in her arms remains unclear, adding further ambiguity and mystery (a strategy that plays to the Gothic desires of her eavesdropping, gossipy audience). The representation of the mother breastfeeding this unidentifiable entity denotes a witch suckling her demonic familiar. It was believed that witches nursed malevolent spirits, often in the form of animals, with their own 'impure' milk or blood.⁷⁴ This allusion is strengthened by the terrifying demonic image of the baby's 'wicked looks', and by 'the fiendish faces one, two, three' that 'hung at my breasts, and pulled at me' – which potentially denote the diabolic exchange between the mother/witch and the devil.

⁷⁴ William Hogarth's 1762 engraving *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* depicts a witch giving suck to a feline familiar. A description of this superstition is also featured in an edition of *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, Volume 76, Part 1 (1814), p. 198.

As she nurses her son, the mad mother's pain is alleviated. The act of breastfeeding is depicted as a form of healing:

Suck, little babe, oh suck again!
It cools my blood; it cools my brain;
Thy lips I feel them, baby! they
Draw from my heart the pain away.⁷⁵

The mother's appeals to her son to ease her pain (both emotional and physical) establish an interesting connection between 'The Mad Mother' and the healing ceremonies practiced by North American conjurors as recorded in Hearne's *Journey*. As indicated above, the Dene conjurors believed that 'sucking the part affected, blowing, and singing to it; haughing, spitting, and at the same time uttering a heap of unintelligible jargon' could cure ailments. I suggest that Wordsworth directly gestures to Hearne here, and, in consequence, to the North American roots of the mad mother. Instead of being deployed to contextualise 'The Complaint' (where we might expect it), the practice is lifted from Hearne's observations of Indian cultures and transported to British ground. While the healing practice may have its roots in the mother's North American culture (we remember, of course, that similar techniques were employed by cunning folk operating in Britain, as evidenced in Thomas Hancock's 'History of Llanrhaiadr-yn-Mochnant'),⁷⁶ the effect it has on a superstitious *British* community is central to the transatlantic dynamic of Wordsworth's engagement with popular magic.

⁷⁵ Ibid., ll. 31-4.

⁷⁶ Hancock, 'History of Llanrhaiadr-yn-Mochnant', p. 327.

Like Martha Ray, the mad mother embraces an occult identity and, by means of her song, disseminates knowledge of her suffering to those who observe her and repeat her tale – a spell that works to empower her in the social imagination of the community from which she is estranged. As mentioned above, Wordsworth clearly chose very different poetic forms for a group of poems that were written (I suggest) to be read in conjunction with one another. Of the women in the spell poems, Goody Blake appears to have benefitted most from embracing an occult identity. The external narration of the ballad form allows the reader no direct access to the subject's voice. Rather, Goody Blake's words are entirely mediated. However, it is this narrative distance that allows Goody Blake to become mythologised as word of her perceived power circulates and grows within her local community, far removed from the kind of direct depiction of human suffering that we observe in 'The Complaint' (despite the comparability of female experience in the two poems – both deal with women in danger of freezing to death). Similarly, in 'The Thorn', the reader is afforded little access to Martha Ray's voice aside from the haunting refrain that allows her to demarcate and lay claim to her own occult space on the mountainside. As a dramatic monologue manqué, 'The Mad Mother' is complicated by the presence of an opening stanza that acts as a narrative frame. The third-person narration in these lines is more distanced than that of 'The Thorn' (whose speaker has his own distinctive persona). We are then granted direct access to the mother's voice; she speaks nine out of the poem's ten stanzas. In direct comparison to our perceptions of Martha Ray and Goody Blake, the mad mother is arguably the least enfranchised of the three 'occult' women. She may be feared by her community, but her song has a tone of frantic desperation. By allowing the reader direct access to her voice, the mad mother's plight as an

impoverished and potentially mad woman is humanised – akin to the depiction of the forsaken Indian woman’s human suffering, stripped of all sensationalist trappings in ‘The Complaint’. Access to the subject’s voice bypasses the systems of layered gossip and superstition on which cunning folk and other magical practitioners relied for the success of their trade. We are not afforded the same level of access to the psychological trauma behind Martha Ray’s woeful cry or Goody Blake’s recourse to theft in order to survive. However, as the opening stanza establishes, the mother (unlike the forsaken Indian woman) is not *completely* secluded, and she is constantly aware of the presence of the community whose margins she haunts. The poetic form of ‘The Mad Mother’ allows the reader to recognise the mother’s fear and weaknesses – the realities of her suffering – while also demonstrating the societal motivations behind her adoption of a witch-like identity. In order to become feared (and thus empowered) these disenfranchised women must become mythologised. They must embrace their ‘otherness’ as their occult identities rely on their insertion in (and alienation from) a community gripped by fear, superstition, and Gothic desires.

Wordsworth did not seek to educate his reader out of superstition. Indeed, this ambiguity – the perceived *possibilities* that these women may possess supernatural power – is vital if the auditors of their songs are to recognise (and be affected by) the plights of the individuals profiled in the ‘spell’ poems. Drawn into the imaginative and cultural ecologies of these poems, we, as readers, are counted among the superstitious onlookers – invited to read the poems of human suffering on British ground in the same way one might read a text such as Hearne’s travel narratives. The ‘enlightened’ British reader is encouraged to recognise that the same systems of fearful superstition operated on both sides of the Atlantic. Brought into question is

what it means to be 'civilised'. While their communities' fear of occult retribution may have resulted in a measure of empowerment for the women in Wordsworth's spell poems, they still find themselves in desperate situations – impoverished, isolated, abandoned – and are forced to turn to popular magic as a vehicle for empowerment as a last resort. 'The Mad Mother', I argue, is the hinge around which Wordsworth's comparison of 'civilised' British and North American cultures is performed. In 'The Complaint', the reader is presented with an uninterrupted depiction of human suffering, uncomplicated by the sensationalist desires and superstitious beliefs of outsider perspectives – exemplified by the complete evacuation of magic in a poem where readers who were familiar with travel narratives such as Hearne's would have come to expect it. By locating 'The Mad Mother', with all its transatlantic triangulations subtly intact, directly on British ground, the reader is encouraged to rethink the other British spell poems in relation to the portrait of human suffering in 'The Complaint' – to recognise the social realities and tales of marginalisation and abandonment that exist beyond the loquacious narratives of garrulous old sea captains and balladeers. The material occult may well have provided some measure of enfranchisement for these women, but it by no means eliminated their suffering or marginalisation. *Lyrical Ballads* is a call for social reform. The very fact that these women need to rely on material cultures of the occult in the absence of a sense of shared social responsibility when it comes to dealing with the sick or the elderly remains symptomatic of a society that is not truly 'civilised'. The 'uncivilised savagery' for which the self-congratulatory readers of texts such as Hearne's *Journey* criticised the 'barbaric' Northern Indians was revealed to be equally visible and viable in native British communities.

Chapter 4: Coleridge and Curse

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) famously records a division of labour in the composition of *Lyrical Ballads* whereby Coleridge was to deal with incidents and agents that were 'in part at least, supernatural', while Wordsworth would focus on the poems of 'ordinary life'.¹ As recently proven by social historians, popular magic continued to be a part of 'ordinary life' for many individuals 'such as will be found in every village and its vicinity' and, as witnessed in the previous chapter, Wordsworth was clearly invested in material cultures of magical practice when writing his contributions to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.² This chapter aims to inflect our understanding of the division of labour between Coleridge and Wordsworth vis-a-vis superstition and the matter-of-fact. I argue for a reading of their collaborative yet fissiparous venture that sees Wordsworth to be the more invested in magic in the form of material occult practice, and which regards Coleridge as the more sceptical of the two. Coleridge was unable to whole-heartedly align himself with Wordsworth's deployment of material occult cultures as a tool for social enfranchisement. This was an early example of the major disparity that Coleridge identified between his own aesthetic/ethos and Wordsworth's, revealing that the 'radical difference' between the two poets, as profiled by Lucy Newlyn in *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and The Language of Allusion*, predated 1802.³

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), vol. II, p. 6.

² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p. 6.

³ See Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and The Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 87-116.

My focus is a short but intense (personally, politically, poetically) period of time in Coleridge's life, beginning with the composition of 'Religious Musings' in December 1794, and ending with the writing of the 'Frost at Midnight', 'France: An Ode' and 'Fears in Solitude' in the spring of 1798. My analysis of Coleridge's key poems during this time seeks to frame a narrative of the poet's move from radicalism to apostasy which, I argue, can be inferred from the evolution of his investment in various modalities of occult practice. During these years Coleridge moved from an orthodox view of the millennium as a gradual, moral event in 'Religious Musings', to the heady pronouncements of radical prophecy he made in 'Ode on the Departing Year' while at Bristol in late 1796. By 1797-8, however, and in the face of political disillusionment, Coleridge had begun to recognise the rhetorical jugglery behind fanatical revolutionary prophetic discourse. The move to Nether Stowey had prompted a new direction in his literary efforts, yet (as noted above) his attempts to collaborate with Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* were compromised by the divergence between the two poets' portrayals of contemporary cultures of popular magic. Struggling to shed the radicalism that had marked his earlier career, and recognising the inherent disparity between himself and Wordsworth in their negotiation of superstition, Coleridge continued to wrestle with apostasy and radical guilt in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Finally, in the Spring of 1798, he began work on the quarto that would be published later that year by Joseph Johnson. Here, Coleridge would look back on his former radical fervour as infectious superstition, peddled by a band of revolutionaries who were just as guilty of tyrannical control as the monarchic despotisms they hoped to overturn. The three poems in the quarto act as a recantation of his former misplaced principles.

Bristol's Radical Circles: Prophets, Astrologers and Revolutionaries

In the 1780s, many Christians shared the conventional belief that the millennium – the passing from the current, sinful state of the world to the reign of Christ – would occur at an unspecified date in the distant future. The political upheaval of the French Revolution, however, led some to abandon these orthodox views in the 1790s. Suddenly, the approach of the apocalypse seemed far from gradual, and those who considered the revolution to be part of the series of events foretold in *Revelation* expected to be witnesses to that momentous change in their own lifetime. In his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772), Joseph Priestley had announced that 'I shall be looking for the downfall of Church and State together. I am really expecting some very calamitous, but finally glorious events' – events that were figurative, rather than literal.⁴ By 1788, however, his views were transformed into (as Clarke Garrett has it) 'a more conventional notion of a sudden and tangible advent of Christ'.⁵ By 1794, Priestley had become convinced of the immediacy of the apocalypse. Writing to Thomas Belsham, he suggested that 'you may probably live to see it . . . It cannot, I think, be more than twenty years'.⁶

Some millenarian readings of the scriptures continued to be seen as a conventional, respectable (and conservative) part of orthodox Christian faith. However, as J. F. C. Harrison argues,

⁴ Joseph Priestley, 'Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion', *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. John Towill Rutt, 25 vols. (London: Smallfield, 1817-32), vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 146.

⁵ Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 31.

⁶ See Thomas Belsham, *Memoires of Theophilus Lindsey* (London: Williams and Nargate, 1873), p. 248n.

the world recognised certain marks of popular millenarianism which were distinctive: the revelatory claims of prophets and prophetesses, the attempt to relive the conditions of the Gospels, the interpretation of scripture by the light of the Spirit, and the sense of apocalyptic urgency appropriate to belief in imminent and sudden changes on a cosmic scale.⁷

Aspects of fanatical prophecy were considered to be an occult mode of thinking and registered points of contact (and conflict) between millenarianism and popular magic – after all, ‘if the rationale of witchcraft and belief in the occult was to explain and cope with many of the problems of everyday life, the same might be said of a belief in millenarianism’.⁸ Educated millenarians such as John Wesley were ‘committed to a thorough-going acceptance of outward manifestations of supernatural power, yet were uncomfortable about the abracadabra of witchcraft’. At a popular level, however, ‘there was less hesitation in recognizing a similarity between witchcraft and millenarianism’.⁹ As noted in my introduction, the difference between the divinations of the cunning man and the proclamations of the prophet was largely a question of scale:

⁷ J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), p. 49.

⁸ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Fortune-telling and crystal gazing were unlikely to produce more than a local trade, but pronouncements about dearth and plenty, wars, plagues and the significance of comets could raise the status of a cunning man until he was looked upon as a prophet.¹⁰

The relationship between radical millenarianism and magical practitioners at a popular level posed a concern to reactionary forces who believed that the claims made by some millenarians could be associated with revolutionary fanaticism and with the regicidal sectarian prophecies of the 1640s. Pitt's government attempted to suppress works of literature that named the French Revolution as the 'fulfilment of biblical eschatology', and Richard Brothers's claims to be the Nephew of God, chosen to lead the Jews to a new Jerusalem, led to his confinement in 1795 – demonstrating just how dangerous prophetic statements were seen to be in the eyes of an alarmed government, especially when disseminated among an impressionable populace.¹¹

In the mid-1790s Coleridge had struggled to crystallise an identity for himself as poet, rational thinker and Unitarian. Desperate to escape alignment with popular Enthusiasm and unthinking Jacobinism, he carefully considered the roles of poet and prophet – a distinction that was particularly hard to make, as *The Analytical Review* suggests:

¹⁰ Ibid., p 47.

¹¹ Harrison reveals that the radical conclusions in Reverend Joseph Lomas Towers's 1796 millenarian tract *The Illustrations of Prophecy* were 'well calculated to alarm a government which was suspicious of a link between millenarian and radical activity'. See Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 76.

Poetry and prophecy are so nearly allied, that in most nations they have been more or less confounded. In some languages, the same term denotes both a prophet and a poet . . . Both use a bold metaphorical style; both utter their oracles in verse, or in a sort of prose resembling verse; both claim the gift of inspiration; and both are, or at least were once, believed to be inspired.¹²

Jon Mee has established Coleridge's early reluctance to submit to 'Enthusiasm' and suggests that as early as December 1794, he established himself firmly as a poet in 'Religious Musings':

Toward the close of 'Religious Musings,' Coleridge swerves away from laying claim to the power of prophecy. His province is poetry, dealing with prophetic matter, inspired and sublime to be sure, but not itself claiming to be prophecy.¹³

Coleridge's prophetic imagery in 1794 is restrained, and does not assume that the events predicted will immediately come to pass. The revolution in France is seen as merely a step towards a final enlightened goal, rather than being an end itself:

¹² *The Analytical Review, or History of Literature, Domestic and Foreign*, 21 (London: J. Johnson, 1795), p. 213.

¹³ Mee, 'Anxieties of Enthusiasm', p. 196.

Coleridge's apocalypticism is ringed with caution. The French Revolution is not to be understood as the final fulfillment of biblical prophecy in itself; it is the opening only of the fifth of the seven seals.¹⁴

One might say Coleridge's was a gradualist apocalypticism. Further, Mee contends that 'in Coleridge's poetry images of apocalyptic violence are produced only to be controlled and contained; he twice cautions those impatient for apocalyptic change to "Rest awhile"'.¹⁵ Careful to maintain his sceptical view of prophecy, Coleridge in 'Religious Musings' carefully promoted patience and gradualism as a means of avoiding the dangers of popular Enthusiasm.

Coleridge had been drawn to Bristol by Robert Southey, whom he met at the start of a walking tour of Wales in July 1794 – a time that, according to Coleridge's companion Joseph Hucks, was 'so peculiarly alarming to the affairs of this country that every hour comes attended with some fresh calamity'.¹⁶ The geographical position of the city led to political clashes owing largely to its sea-port links to a post-revolutionary America, as well as to the growing tensions between merchants (many of whom earned their living from the slave trade) and the increasing pressure of abolitionist feeling from radical camps. In January 1795 Coleridge made the move from Cambridge and, on his arrival in the city, was assimilated into a circle of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁶ Quoted in John Cornwell, *Coleridge, Poet and Revolutionary* (London: 1973), p. 35.

intellectual dissenters – including various individuals who were invested in the occult and, particularly, in modes of prognostication. His association with Southey, who maintained a (cautious) interest in both philosophical and material aspects of the occult throughout his career – as shown in the lengthy discussions he offers on various subjects such as millenarianism, magical healing and witchcraft in *Letters from England* (1809) – led to Coleridge’s involvement with figures such as the druggist, herbal doctor and self-styled prophet William Bryan, who cited Bristol as one of the cities doomed to fall after he had received an apocalyptic vision in December 1794:

I heard a voice pronounce, in a very awful tone, the following words: “woe is to the city of Bristol! The cry of innocent blood is against it: it shall be taken and fall”. The slaughter on the bridge, and the traffic in slaves, were presented to my mind, as the innocent blood to be avenged.¹⁷

As Garrett has argued, ‘at one point or another, William Bryan was interested in practically every conceivable aspect of late eighteenth-century occult, mystical and quasi-scientific inquiry’.¹⁸ Bryan also believed himself to have been ‘led by the Holy Spirit’ to practice sympathetic healing which, as Harrison explains, ‘meant that by the power of love he was able to experience in his own body the symptoms of the disease

¹⁷ William Bryan, ‘A testimony of the Spirit of Truth Concerning Richard Brothers’, *Prophetical Passages, Concerning the Present Times, in which the person, character, missing &c. &c. of Richard Brothers is clearly pointed at as the Elijah of the present day*. . . (London: G. Riebau, 1795), p. 5-6. For a lengthier discussion of the radical circles Coleridge was exposed to, operating in and around Bristol during this period, see Chapter 5.

¹⁸ Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly*, p. 75.

of his patients'.¹⁹ Sympathetic magic was employed by cunning folk as a means of attacking witches, and involved a method of bodily transference that might be interestingly read alongside the curse in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'.²⁰

In early 1796, Coleridge also became acquainted with William Gilbert, the Antigua-born astrologer and radical contributor to *The Conjuror's Magazine*. Astrology was another popular mode of prediction, comprising (as outlined in my introduction) several very different sub-branches of practice. Astrological nativity-reading was offered by many cunning men in the service of popular fortune-telling, but the stars were also read on national and universal scales to foretell the fortunes of political individuals and of nations. The practices of astrology and prophecy each have their own distinct history and modes of practice. However, as Harrison has argued:

There is evidence that some millenarians were, or had been attracted to astrology, and that others were prone to listen to wise men who ventured into prophesying. Brothers in his later years was committed to very unorthodox views about the stars. Joanna Southcott had to warn her followers 'not to seek after stargazers or astrologers'.²¹

¹⁹ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 71.

²⁰ See Owen Davies, *Popular Magic*, pp. 108-9.

²¹ Harrison, *The Second Coming*, p. 50.

For some, astrology was a means by which God's presence as a creative force in the universe could be seen and comprehended. London-based astrologer Ebenezer Sibly claimed that

astrology comprehends every operation that proceeds out of the master-wheel or frame of nature, and furnishes us with a knowledge of the occult virtues of all earthly substances, and of the nature and end of every particle of God's Creation.²²

Cunning man John Parkins went one step further in his *Universal Fortune Teller* (1810) to claim that astrology was superior to scriptural prophecy, for instance, as the stars were the language of God (a belief that suggestively corresponds with Coleridge's 1790s view of nature as the literal language of God), while the scriptures had been translated by man:

Others have said that it is unlawful, and likewise a sin, to presume to read the heavens, as thereby to judge of the fate of any person whatsoever. The same characters may as well tell me it is a sin to read the Bible; I should believe them just as soon; for I look upon one of them to be equally as holy and as sacred in every respect whatsoever as the other, seeing that they both contain the

²² Ebenezer Sibly, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Occult Sciences: Or, The Art of Foretelling Future Events and Contingencies* (London, 1795), p. 54.

whole will and word of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The one was printed by the hand of man, while the other was written by the finger of the most high God, and this is the principal reason why the children of the world, the flesh and the devil cannot read it.²³

Of course, Parkins fails to consider the act of translation and mediation in which the astrologer himself would be engaged while interpreting the stars, but the above quotation does suggest an interesting alignment between scriptural prophecy and astrology.

Coleridge had been introduced to Gilbert by the publisher Joseph Cottle shortly before Gilbert's completion of his theosophical poem *The Hurricane*. Cottle's *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (1843) reveals the fondly ironic relationship between the Bristol circle and the astrologer:

Gilbert was an astrologer; and at the time of a person's birth, he would with undoubting confidence predict all the leading events of his future life, and sometimes (if he knew anything of his personal history) even venture to declare the past. The caution with which he usually touched the second subject formed a striking contrast with the positive declarations concerning the first.²⁴

²³ John Parkins, *Universal Fortune Teller*, p. xiv.

²⁴ Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (London: Houlston and Stone Man, 1847), p. 33.

In April 1796, Coleridge published Gilbert's essay on commercial economics and the importance of international trade in *The Watchman*, accompanied by a brief note about its author:

Mr G. discovers much general knowledge, and when his reasonings are not perhaps unimpregnably solid, even then they are ingenious, and uniformly conveyed in a style luminous and elegant.²⁵

The May 1796 edition of *The Watchman* featured a pared-down version of *The Hurricane* bearing the title 'Fragment by a West Indian'. This extract of only 22 lines was, as Paul Cheshire remarks, 'stitched together to present an attractive romantic poem without a trace of Gilbert's metaphysics'.²⁶ Unwilling to invest in some of Gilbert's more radical ideas, Coleridge stripped all mention of astrology from the extract during the editing process. At this point, Coleridge's use of prognostication in his poetry had still not extended beyond those modes that were considered orthodox. While Coleridge's respect for Gilbert's searching imagination is evident in his inclusion of 'The Hurricane' in *The Watchman*, he read the occult aspects of his friend's work with constant scepticism. By 1796, Gilbert had begun a decline into a state of madness

²⁵ *The Watchman*, 5 (Bristol: S. T. Coleridge, April 1796), p. 144.

²⁶ Paul Cheshire, *William Gilbert's Works* (2009), <http://www.williamgilbert.com/Gilbert_Works.htm> [accessed 15 August 2012].

that was well documented by his contemporaries. On 17 December Coleridge sent a copy of *The Hurricane* to John Thelwall, accompanied by the following note:

A strange Poem written by an Astrologer here, who *was* a man of fine Genius, which, at intervals, he still discovers. But, ah me! Madness smote with her hand, and stamped with her feet and swore that he should be her's – & her's he is. He is a man of fluent Eloquence & general knowledge, gentle in his manners, warm in his affections; but unfortunately he has received a few rays of supernatural Light thro' a crack in his upper story. I *express* myself unfeelingly; but indeed my heart always aches when I think of him.²⁷

Despite Coleridge's concern about Gilbert's health, it is clear that he maintained a certain curiosity about, and indeed, respect for, the astrologer. As demonstrated in his contributions to *The Conjuror's Magazine* earlier in the decade (outlined in Chapter 1), Gilbert was no stranger to making radically political astrological predictions. Gilbert's intellectual legacy – submerged as it was in cultures and discourses of astrology – manifested itself in Coleridge's poetry of the mid-late 1790s as prognostication and recantation became central issues (and convenient modes of discourse) for the disillusioned radical. I suggest that Coleridge may well have looked back on the Antiguan talisman-maker by 1798 as something of a cautionary tale – a portrait of the personal costs of radical fanaticism. The same scepticism regarding astrological and

²⁷ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 276–87, p. 86.

theological predictions would be articulated in Coleridge's flexible programme of prophecy and future-telling during 1798, but would be carefully balanced with the other side of the prognosticatory coin – recantation.

However, in 'Ode on the Departing Year' (late December 1796), at a moment of high moral and political agitation, Coleridge looked back over the contours of 1796, and prophesied the events of the year to come. In the tradition of Gilbert, Coleridge engaged with astrological prediction. '[F]ixt on Heaven's unchanged clime', he looked to the sky, and among the stars saw 'the skirts of the DEPARTING YEAR'. Before a cloud 'forbade [his] sight', obstructing his view of the stars, Coleridge prophesied the events of the year to come, including the possible defeat and destruction of England, who 'Abandoned of Heaven' had joined the wild yelling of famine and blood!'. The death of Catherine II of Russia on 6 November 1796 was hailed by Coleridge as 'the disenshrining of a dæmon'²⁸ – a triumphant step towards the defeat of monarchical rule as the spirits of those massacred in the fall of Ismail dance around the tyrannical Queen's grave:

Mighty Army of the Dead,

Dance, like Death-fires, round her Tomb!

Then with prophetic song relate

Each some scepter'd Murderer's fate!²⁹

²⁸ Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 486, n. 40.

²⁹ Coleridge, 'Ode on the Departing Year', ll. 60-4.

An apocalyptic frenzy of madness and violence characterised the memory of 1796, a year 'garmented with gore'. A 'mute Enchantment' had fallen over those who mourned the horrors of the past. The 'SPIRIT of the EARTH' arrives to break the silence with a political call to arms, predicting yet more violence if atonement for the wrongs of Britain (including here participation in the slave trade) was not offered. Fearing the 'Years of Havoc yet unborn', Coleridge prophesied the 'predestin'd ruins' of England:

O doom'd to fall, enslav'd and vile,

O ALBION! O my mother Isle!³⁰

Recalling his disquisition on the Friends of Freedom in his 1795 Bristol lectures, Coleridge's footnotes to the poem condemned his fellow countrymen who possessed disinterested radical sympathies but did not act on them: 'The friends of freedom in this country are idle. Some are timid; some are selfish; and many the torpedo touch of hopelessness has numbed into inactivity'.³¹ The prophecies in 'Ode on the Departing Year' are offered to prompt and enlighten those entranced by the quiet safety of their own lives, protected at 'coward distance' from the suffering in Europe by England's island condition:

³⁰ Ibid, ll. 130-1.

³¹ *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 307.

I bid you haste, a mixt tumultuous band!

From every private bower,

And each domestic hearth,

Haste for one solemn hour.³²

In a letter of 26 December 1796 to Thomas Poole, Coleridge explained that 'Ode on the Departing Year' was written 'not in the soft obscurities of Retirement, or under the shelter of Academic Groves, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow'.³³ Despite his continued resistance to Enthusiasm, Coleridge acknowledged here the contiguous roles of poet and prophet in these politically (and personally) critical moments:

I am more anxious lest the moral spirit of the Ode should be mistaken. You, I am sure, will not fail to recollect, that among the Ancients, the Bard and the Prophet were one and the same character, and you know that although I prophesy curses, I pray fervently for blessings.³⁴

³² Coleridge, 'Ode on the Departing Year', ll. 24-9.

³³ Coleridge, 'Letter to Thomas Poole, 26 December 1796', *Letters*, p. 289.

³⁴ Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 304.

Disavowing his own call to 'rest awhile' in 'Religious Musings' two years earlier, Coleridge's prophecy in 'Ode on the Departing Year' was a call to action. Without the prognostications of the newly configured poet-cum-prophet, his fellow revolutionaries would remain suspended in the silence of enchanted sleep. 'Ode on the Departing Year' urges Coleridge's fellow countrymen and revolutionary sympathisers to heed, and act on, prophesied political and universal liberty.

On 31 December 1796, the same day that 'Ode on the Departing Year' was published in the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, Coleridge moved to Nether Stowey. Despite the heady prophetic radicalism of the final poem he had written while at Bristol, Coleridge had begun to feel the strain of his radical identity on arriving in his new home in 1797. Inspired by the apparent simplicity of the Wordsworths' lives at Racedown (where he had visited them in June 1797, shortly before the Wordsworths' own move to Alfoxden in July), he began to map out a new life for himself and his family following the birth of his first son, Hartley. However, political pressures continued to be felt in his rural retreat. Governmental surveillance and local rumour fuelled the search for new literary modes to inhabit. The poetry that Coleridge produced at Stowey was preoccupied with the notion of curses. 'Christabel', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'The Three Graves', all composed 1797–8, are poems that focus (according to Coleridge's preface to 'The Three Graves') on 'the possible effect on the imagination, from an Idea violently and suddenly impressed on it'.³⁵

The inherited critical orthodoxy that views Coleridge as more deeply preoccupied with the supernatural than Wordsworth notwithstanding, I suggest that

³⁵ Coleridge, *Complete Poems*, p. 207.

Coleridge was in fact the more sceptical of the two poets. While Wordsworth embraced magical cultures, Coleridge's poetry of the late 1790s was invested, I suggest, in a project similar to that begun by Lemoine in *The Conjuror's Magazine*, which attempted to educate his readers and fellow radicals in the act of sceptical reading. I argue that Coleridge's decision to focus on the curse motif in his late 1790s poetry was a sceptically cautious response to Wordsworth's portrayal of disenfranchised individuals embracing popular magic as a means of social empowerment. As the decade drew to a close, Coleridge became increasingly anxious regarding the systems of fear and superstition that popular magic relied on to be a potentially limiting, despotic force. This scepticism was also intimately related to his own conflicted, guilt-ridden feelings in the wake of the disappointments of the French Revolution. As disillusioned radical, new father and wavering Unitarian, Coleridge sought to reinvent himself both publicly and personally. I argue that Coleridge's 'curse' poems act as testing grounds for his fluctuating (and occasionally contradictory) political allegiances.

'The Three Graves' and Wordsworthian Inheritances

Wordsworth and Coleridge's first attempt at poetic collaboration explored the psychological effects that curses – or bewitchment – might have on the superstitious imagination. In July 1797, Wordsworth entrusted Coleridge with the first two cantos of his psychological ballad 'The Three Graves', a poem Wordsworth had begun at Racedown. It is unclear when Coleridge worked on his contributions to the poem, but by April 1798 he had written two further parts, which would eventually be published,

accompanied by a short preface, in *The Friend* of September 1809. Coleridge's preface to the published poem reveals that he had intended it to be six parts long. However, the final sections were never completed, and the ballad remains unfinished. My discussion of 'The Three Graves' explores its multi-authored genesis, initially focusing on Wordsworth's intentions for the poem. I will then consider Coleridge's appropriation of the piece, which ultimately works to articulate his concerns regarding the mental tyranny of superstitious belief in contradistinction to Wordsworth's very different agenda in the emerging *Lyrical Ballads* project.

In 1963, the edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published by Brett and Jones characterised 'The Three Graves', 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Peter Bell' as belonging to a 'curse-cycle' of poems.³⁶ However, 'The Three Graves' (along with 'Christabel') failed to earn a place in *Lyrical Ballads*, and 'The Ancient Mariner' continued to be a conflicting (and conflicted) presence in the volume. I argue that grouping these poems together – and in particular bringing 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' into a relation with 'The Three Graves' – fails to consider the mechanisms of popular magic that are employed within the poems, and neglects to account for Wordsworth's deployment of popular magic as a mode of social empowerment during his time at Alfoxden. I argue that Brett and Jones's suggestion that 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' and 'The Three Graves' are part of the same 'curse cycle' of poems is not entirely satisfactory. Both poems deal with curse themes, but the motivations behind the laying of these curses are by no means uniform.

³⁶ *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 270.

Following its publication, Wordsworth noted his dissatisfaction with Coleridge's development of 'The Three Graves':

I gave him the subject of his Three Graves; but he made it too shocking and painful, and not sufficiently sweetened by any healing views. Not being able to dwell on or sanctify natural woes, he took it to the supernatural . . . these things have not the hold on the heart which nature gives.³⁷

Critics have noted that this reproof registers Wordsworth's dissatisfaction with Coleridge's supernatural transformation of the ballad.³⁸ Implementing a binary distinction between the work of the two poets based on their attitudes to the supernatural, however, fails to account for the role of popular magic in the first two Parts of the poem (written by Wordsworth alone) and oversimplifies the nuances of Wordsworth's negotiation of the occult in poems such as 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. Such readings also risk underplaying Wordsworth's role in the composition of the poem as it was published in 1809. What one might refer to as the 'adulteration' of 'The Three Graves' as a rural ballad cannot be entirely attributed to Coleridge. As John Beer has suggested, Wordsworth 'may well have contributed elsewhere to the poem', and it is difficult to deduce how much of Parts III and IV are Wordsworth's.³⁹

³⁷ William Wordsworth, quoted in Barron Field, *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey Little (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975), p. 100.

³⁸ See, for instance, Stephen Maxfield Parrish, 'The Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy', *PMLA*, 73.4 (1958), pp. 367–74.

³⁹ John Beer, *Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. John Beer (London: Dent, 1974), p. 155n.

Wordsworth's disappointed comments on 'The Three Graves' were made (long) after he had developed a view of popular magic in *Lyrical Ballads* as an agent of social reform. I argue that Wordsworth's discontent with the poem is partly owing to his own poetic (and, indeed, political) development during the late 1790s. For Wordsworth, the 'rural tale of cottage witchcraft' represented a focus that he had left behind on leaving Racedown in 1797.⁴⁰ By spring 1798, Wordsworth would be composing 'The Thorn' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' for the *Lyrical Ballads* project – recastings, I suggest, of his own contributions to 'The Three Graves'.

The magical practitioners in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* are the poorest, most vulnerable members of society. As outlined in Chapter 3, the curse placed on the wealthy, uncharitable landowner in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' acts as an agent of social equality: it is a redressing force that ensures that the marginalised Goody Blake has recourse to some means of empowerment. The curse in 'The Three Graves', however, is bound up with the complications of intergenerational sexual desire in the domestic sphere. The plot sees a jealous woman fall in love with her son-in-law. When Edward rejects her, she curses his marriage to her daughter Mary. Whereas Goody Blake is marginalised as a result of her old age and poverty, the robust mother-in-law is by no means financially disenfranchised. In Wordsworth's contributions to 'The Three Graves', Mary assures her lover that 'my mother she is rich' and the mother-in-law attempts to convince Edward to marry her by promising him property:

⁴⁰ Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 169.

Sweet Edward for one kiss of yours

I'd give my house and land

And if you'll go to church with me

And take me for your bride

I'll make you heir of all I have;

Nothing shall be denied.⁴¹

This promise is repeated in Coleridge's preface to the continuation of the poem: 'I will this very day settle all my property on you'.⁴² The mother-in-law's curse is a means of individual revenge on her younger female rival (her own daughter) and on the man who has rejected her sexually. The mother's choice to abandon her child for the sake of a taboo sexual relationship denotes her transgression of normative familial and social bonds. The destruction of the family unit (the broken parental bond) is realised corporeally as the curse seems to be borne out in the childlessness of Mary's and Edward's marriage. Mary is described as 'barren' by Wordsworth in Parts I and II of the poem, and this perhaps suggests an alternative reading of the lines 'Beneath the

⁴¹ William Wordsworth, 'The Three Graves', *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Series*, ed. Jared Curtis (Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, 2014), vol. I, pp. 74-81, ll. 144-9

⁴² Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 207.

foulest mother's curse/ No child could ever thrive' – a reference to (what Mary believes to be) her curse-induced infertility.⁴³

A far cry from the sympathetic depiction of Goody Blake, or even Martha Ray (whose possible act of infanticide intensifies, rather than complicates, her status as society's victim), the representation of the 'ruthless' mother-in-law lacks psychological depth; the complexities of taboo relationships and her unarticulated history aside, she appears as a straightforward agent of harm in Wordsworth's original contributions to the poem. Rather than gesturing at the pathologies and trauma behind the mother-in-law's disinheritance of her daughter, Wordsworth's opening section of the poem portrays her as driven by little more than animalistic sexual jealousy ('Would ye come here, ye maiden vile, / And rob me of my mate?') and focuses on the curse as unnatural sin:

The mother still was in the bower,

And with a greedy heart

She drank perdition on her knees,

Which never may depart.⁴⁴

⁴³ Matters relating to childbirth were believed to be a realm of specialist knowledge for cunning women. Notorious wise woman (and poisoner) Mary Bateman advertised her services dealing with 'all disorders of the mind or body, abortions, miscarriages, conceptions, barrenness of the womb' according to *The Wonderful Life and Remarkable Trial of Mary Bateman*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Wordsworth, 'The Three Graves', ll. 186-9.

Reading Parts I and II of 'The Three Graves' alongside the 'spell poems'

Wordsworth composed in spring 1798 suggest that a 'rural tale of cottage witchcraft' is being inflected in such a way as to identify popular magic as an agent of emancipation. The sexton in 'The Three Graves' begins his tale by describing to a passing traveller-auditor a blossoming thorn bush, where he says 'We loved to stretch our lazy limbs / In summer's noon-tide heat'.⁴⁵ The traveller asks why this immediately talismanic thorn has now become unkempt and overgrown ('where the dock and nettles meet') and is now home only to the toad (a creature commonly identified as a witch's familiar). The thorn bush, after all, 'is neither dry nor dead, / But still it blossoms sweet'.⁴⁶ The sexton reveals that the thorn demarcates the site of three graves – the resting place of the mother-in-law, Mary and her friend Ellen. The ground is considered cursed and remains 'By any foot unworn'. When the mother-in-law places an 'ill wish' on her daughter, she exclaims 'And in the Church-yard curséd be / The grave where thou shalt lie!', aggressively claiming the space as her own.⁴⁷ I suggest that these elements were reworked by Wordsworth to become the act of mapping and marking out of occult topography performed by the marginalised Martha Ray in 'The Thorn' in an attempt to carve out a private space for herself. That act of demarcation is of course taken up and confirmed by those who surveil her.

There are also suggestive parallels between 'The Three Graves' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. In the former, the mother-in-law falls to her knees in the bower as she curses her daughter's impending marriage:

⁴⁵Ibid., ll. 3-4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., ll. 9-10.

⁴⁷ Ibid., ll. 164-5.

To him no word the mother said,

But on her knees she fell,

And fetched her breath while thrice your hand

Might toll the passing-bell.

‘Thou daughter now above my head,

Whom in my womb I bore,

May every drop of thy heart's blood

Be curst for ever more.⁴⁸

The action is repeated when the mother-in-law curses Ellen in the church – a moment at which the possibility of prayer is balked. Similarly, the impoverished Goody Blake falls to her knees as she lays her curse on Harry Gill, but instead of turning to any diabolical force, she appeals to ‘God that is the judge of all’ in prayer. Further, the hedge-gleaning on which Goody Blake relies for survival is also present in Part III of ‘The Three Graves’ (a Wordsworthian element, perhaps, in Coleridge’s continuation of

⁴⁸ Ibid., ll. 154-61.

the poem), where it is performed in a very different temper, and in very different circumstances, by Edward:

I saw young Edward by himself

Stalk fast adown the lee,

He snatched a stick from every fence,

A twig from every tree.

He snapped them still with hand or knee,

And then away they flew!

As if with his uneasy limbs

He knew not what to do!⁴⁹

Rather than providing the life-preserving kindling that keeps an impoverished and freezing Goody Blake warm at night, the action as performed by Edward is merely idle distraction. On hearing Mary frantically exclaim to her friend 'O Ellen, Ellen, she cursed me, / And now she hath cursed you!', Edward, frozen with fear, 'only gnashed his teeth' – another link, perhaps, to the 'chattering' teeth of the cursed Harry Gill.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Coleridge, 'The Three Graves', ll. 137-44.

⁵⁰ Ibid, ll. 135-6, 148.

Again, Edward's speechlessness in 'The Three Graves' is simply caused by his fear of the mother-in-law's curse. Rewritten in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', however, interrupted speech caused by chattering teeth mark Goody Blake's own silencing and suffering and the realignment of social inequity by way of popular magic as this suffering is felt on a bodily level by Harry Gill.

By 1798, Wordsworth, now invested in popular magic as a vehicle for social emancipation, looked back on his previous intentions for 'The Three Graves' with dissatisfaction. In a corrective reimagining of his tale of rural cursing, Wordsworth invested his occult figures with the psychological depth that was lacking in his representation of mother-in-law, and ensured that the new spell poems of *Lyrical Ballads* were fully immersed in the social conditions that compelled marginalised individuals to embrace popular magic as an enfranchising force.

'The Three Graves' and 'Christabel' – Coleridge's Enslaving Superstition

While Wordsworth's engagements with popular magic were beginning to develop in a different direction in the context of the social manifesto of the *Lyrical Ballads* project, Coleridge continued to write two further Parts to 'The Three Graves' after July 1797. In the preface to the poem as it was published in *The Friend* of 1809, Coleridge wrote:

I had been reading Bryan Edwards' account of the effect of the Oby witchcraft of the Negroes in the West Indies, and Hearne's deeply interesting anecdotes of similar workings of the imagination of the Copper Indians (those of my readers who have it in their power will be well repaid for the trouble of

referring to those works for the passages alluded to) and I conceived the design of showing that instances of this kind are not peculiar to savage or barbarous tribes.⁵¹

Having been presented with two Parts of a poem set in rural England that deal directly with the psychological effects of spells, Coleridge continued 'The Three Graves' by drawing direct links to colonial narratives to demonstrate that the same cultures of popular magic continued to operate on both sides of the Atlantic. Coleridge was thus engaging a transatlantic dynamic similar to that invoked by Wordsworth while writing 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman' and 'The Mad Mother'. Soon after appropriating 'The Three Graves', Coleridge also began work on 'Christabel', another poem that deals with curses and the powerful effects that guilt can have on the superstitious imagination. 'Christabel' is a similar project to 'The Three Graves', but instead of highlighting the workings of popular magic across a geographical, cultural and racial divide, Coleridge introduces a politically resonant temporal analogy. 'Christabel' is set in a medieval, gothic, pre-enlightenment age, but its superstitions are to be evaluated against those that had survived to the present, both in the colonies and in contemporary Britain. Read alongside each other, I suggest that these two poems reveal the attitude that Coleridge took – *contra* Wordsworth – in response to contemporary cultures of popular magic. Both 'Christabel' and 'The Three Graves' are articulations of popular magic and superstition as incarcerating, tyrannical forces.

⁵¹ Coleridge, *Complete Poems*, pp. 207-8.

In his contributions to 'The Three Graves', Coleridge (continuing the project begun by Wordsworth) took what had been observed by Hearne and Edwards in colonial territories and revealed that the same practices continued to exist on both sides of the Atlantic. Bryan Edwards's *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793) included a report, written by 'the agent of Jamaica to the commissioners appointed to examine into the slave trade', on the Obi magic practised in the West Indies:

The Negros in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult and fear [the Obeah-men], to these oracles they resort, and with the most implicit faith upon all occasions, whether for the cure of disorders, the obtaining revenge for injuries or insults, the conciliating of favour, the discovery of punishment of the thief or the adulterer, and the prediction of future events.⁵²

It benefited Edwards, whose livelihood depended on the slave trade, to promote the 'deluded negroes' as superstitious and in need of enlightened European governance, and the report is careful to distinguish that 'every precaution is taken to conceal [the Obi] from the knowledge and discovery of white people'. The 'common tricks of Obi, such as hanging up feathers, bottles, egg shells, &c. &c in order to intimidate negroes of a thievish disposition' were 'laughed at by the white inhabitants as harmless

⁵² Bryan Edwards, *The History Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London: B. Crosby, 1798), p. 166.

stratagems, contrived by the more sagacious, for the more simple and superstitious blacks'.⁵³

However, the spells and curses observed in the colonies by Edwards and Hearne (whose representation of Chipewyan conjurors in his *Journey* was another key source for Coleridge's extension of 'The Three Graves') can be directly compared with contemporary practices of popular magic that continued to operate in British villages and towns throughout the Romantic period. The Obeah were consulted as healers, legislators, detectives and future-tellers – the same roles undertaken by cunning folk in Britain. Edwards's report reveals that 'the stoutest among [the Creoles and Africans] tremble at the very sight of the ragged bundle, or the bottle of egg-shells, which are stuck in the thatch or hung over the door of a hut or upon the branch of a plantain tree, to deter thieves'.⁵⁴ These 'Obi objects' were 'usually composed of a farrago of materials . . . Blood, feathers, parrots [*sic*] beaks, dogs teeth, alligators teeth, broken bottles, grave dirt, run and egg-shells'.⁵⁵ British cunning folk continued to involve themselves in similar apotropaic rituals. 'Witch bottles' (often made using urine, pins, thorns or nails) continued to be used to ward off malign magic (evidence that people were still afraid of curses), to cure ailments or even to procure love. Other 'charmed' items such as roasted hearts were deployed as a cure for bewitchment:

The heart of the dead, bewitched animal was cut out, stuck with pins, needles or thorns, and then hung up in the chimney to roast slowly. The roasting action

⁵³ Edwards, *History of the British Colonies*, p. 167; 170.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

caused, through sympathetic magic, excruciating pains in the heart of the suspected witch.⁵⁶

Owen Davies and Timothy Easton reveal that this British practice was ‘widespread across the country’ and, like the talismanic objects deployed by the Obeah men, ‘acted as a deterrent as well as a punishment’.⁵⁷

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Dene people believed that conjurors had the ability to ‘conjure to death’. Edwards’s history of the West Indies reveals that the people of the Caribbean held similar beliefs regarding curses, which could be impressed on the mind of the victim with such force that it could eventually prove fatal:

When a negro is robbed of a fowl or a hog, he applies directly to the Obeah man or woman; it is then made known among his fellow blacks, that Obi is set for the thief; and as soon as the latter hears the dreadful news, his terrified imagination begins to work . . . the painful sensation in the head, the bowels, or any other part, and casual loss or hurt, confirms his apprehensions, and he believes himself the devoted victim of an invisible and irresistible agency. Sleep, appetite, and cheerfulness forsake him, his strength decays, his

⁵⁶ Owen Davies and Timothy Easton, ‘Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts’, *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 209-31, p. 214

⁵⁷ Davies and Easton refer to a roasted heart from Sussex that dated to the 1790s. See ‘Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts’, p. 214.

disturbed imagination is haunted without respite, his features wear the settled gloom of despondency: dirt, or any other unwholesome substance, become his only food, and he contracts a morbid habit of body, and gradually sinks into the grave.⁵⁸

This depiction of the cursed Obi victim is directly invoked in 'The Three Graves' as Mary's mood and health decline under her mother's curse:

'I'm dull and sad! indeed, indeed

I know I have no reason!

Perhaps I am not well in health,

And 'tis a gloomy season'.⁵⁹

This curse takes on English ground (and a literal plot of English ground is seen as cursed), but by explicitly directing the reader to the colonial narratives in his preface, Coleridge invokes the same transatlantic dynamic that, as I have argued, underpins Wordsworth's spell poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. Highlighting the superstitious fear of curses that continued to take hold of the imaginations of individuals and communities in Britain, Coleridge undermined the enlightened European position from which these

⁵⁸ Edwards, *History of the British Colonies*, p. 168.

⁵⁹ 'The Three Graves', ll.50-3.

colonial histories were narrated and on which they relied). Wordsworth would have recognised in Coleridge's continuation of 'The Three Graves' a move cognate with his own in 'The Complaint' and 'The Mad Mother', in the form of that binding, ironising transatlantic comparison. However, the poem would have been sat awkwardly in *Lyrical Ballads* since Coleridge's attitude to the mindset and consequences of popular magic was far more sceptical than that of Wordsworth. The mother-in-law may well be the demonised subject of a sensationalist tale told by a garrulous old sexton but, as I will explain, she is not a sympathetic victim of social disenfranchisement – no Martha Ray or Goody Blake.

While Coleridge continued to work on 'The Three Graves', he was also engaged in a complexly related project. Originally intended for inclusion in the second volume of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 'Christabel' was dropped by Wordsworth – a decision that has since been set at the door of the supernatural genetics of the tale. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth wrote:

A Poem of Mr Coleridge's was to have concluded the Volumes; but upon mature deliberation I found that the Style of this Poem was so discordant from my own that it could not be printed along with my poems with any propriety.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years 1787–1805*, 2nd edition, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, revised by Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 309–10, p. 309.

The disagreement (or what critics have taken to be such) between Wordsworth and Coleridge over the supernatural and its 'Style' (a term that encompasses both tonal values and ideological positioning) has formed the basis for most scholarly responses to the elision of 'Christabel' from *Lyrical Ballads*. Karen Swann, for instance, suggests that "'Christabel'" was the poem that made Wordsworth realise that the poetry of real life and the poetry of the supernatural do not "balance".⁶¹ However, this view is problematic once we read *Lyrical Ballads* with Wordsworth's investment in popular magic as an agent of social reform firmly in mind. If 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' allows the middle-class reader to appreciate the measure of empowerment that a surviving occult culture offers to the disenfranchised lower classes, then it is necessary to refocus the apparent division between Coleridge's 'supernatural' and Wordsworth's 'natural' – categories that bear a far more involved relation to each other than critics have previously assumed. Crucial in the decision to remove 'Christabel' from *Lyrical Ballads* is the ideological 'discordance' between Wordsworth's and Coleridge's investments in the material occult.

While Wordsworth's other poems in the volume would make it perfectly clear that *Lyrical Ballads* should be read in a socio-political context, the (neo-)medieval, gothic distractions (one might say) of 'Christabel' make it difficult for the reader to establish a connection between the poem and the contemporary social politics of the occult that Wordsworth's poems of popular magic work to highlight. The themes of magic and curse are typically seen as part-and-parcel of the chivalric backdrop to the poem (owing largely to the supposed 'disappearance' of magical practice post-1735).

⁶¹ Karen Swann, 'Literary Gentleman and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on Christabel's Character', *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 204–20.

However, curses continued to pose a very real threat throughout the Romantic period for members of the community for whom a poor harvest, diseased livestock, or illness could spell complete ruin and poverty. For the Coleridge of the 1795 Bristol lectures, one strand of whose faith in gradual enlightenment and active social responsibility was predicated on elevating the populace out of ignorance, popular magic (and, by extension, the existence of the malign witchcraft that these services were employed to counter) served as a reminder that despotic systems of mental oppression and enslavement were alive and well in Britain, as they were on the colonies.

In 'Christabel', the witch-like Geraldine's occult identity is grounded in pre-enlightenment views of diabolic witchcraft. However, read alongside 'The Three Graves', the systems of ensnaring superstitious belief – the economy of hexing – by which the mother-in-law pronounces her curse is the same as that which incarcerates Christabel under Geraldine's demonic power. Medieval belief is held up against the uncivilised superstitions of the colonies and, in turn, are reflected back onto contemporary British ground. In all three contexts, superstition is 'mental enslavement'.⁶²

As this thesis, and the recent work of social historians, have emphasised, early modern beliefs concerning witchcraft continued to exert their psychological pressures during the Romantic period. Robert Boyd's 1787 *Justices of the Peace*, which outlines the typical areas of jurisdiction proper to JPs, quotes extensively from William Forbes's 1730 text *The Institutes of the Law of Scotland*. Despite no longer having any legal

⁶² Tim Fulford, 'Slavery and Superstition in the Supernatural Poems', *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 45-58.

existence (following the Witchcraft Act of 1735), witchcraft, Boyd argues, ‘continues, still, to be enumerated in the *Commission of the Peace*, among the other crimes cognizable by the justices’.⁶³ The quotation from Forbes describes several identifying characteristics used to identify witches, many of which are germane to Geraldine’s character. Witches were unable to ‘say the Lord’s prayer’⁶⁴ – a trait shared by Geraldine who claims that she ‘cannot speak for weariness’ when her innocent companion encourages her to ‘Praise we the Virgin all divine’ (a further example of Coleridge’s interest in the exchange between curses and prayers, glib fluency and silence that he would also dramatise in ‘The Ancient Mariner’ and embed – in an emphatically related but more explicitly political context – in ‘Fears in Solitude’).⁶⁵ Christabel’s carrying Geraldine over the castle threshold (mimicking the traditional ceremony between bride and groom on entering the marital home) suggests that Geraldine required Christabel’s explicit invitation to enter domestic space.⁶⁶ Many individuals continued to believe that a witch would have the power to lay a curse only once she had crossed the boundary into her target’s private space (usually by breaching the threshold of a house, or having gained admittance to her victim’s bedroom) – a belief that, as Owen Davies has revealed, remained unnervingly active into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries.⁶⁷ Having gained access to Christabel’s bedroom, Geraldine undresses and famously reveals her ‘true form’. The hideous sight of Geraldine’s body – ‘hideous, deformed and pale of hue’, as it was

⁶³ Robert Boyd, *The office, powers, and jurisdiction, of His Majesty’s justices of the peace and commissioners of supply* (London: J. Murray, 1787), vol. I, p. 464.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 467.

⁶⁵ Coleridge, ‘Christabel’, ll. 142; 139.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 134; 131-2.

⁶⁷ One nineteenth-century Sussex farmer, for instance, refused to let a suspected witch pass through his gate ‘for fear she would put a spell on his cows’. See Owen Davies, *Witchcraft Magic and Power*, p. 208.

described in the original draft – denotes that she is marked, physically, as a witch.⁶⁸

‘On the meaner proselytes’, Forbes reveals, ‘the devil fixes, in some secret part of their bodies, a mark, as his seal to know his own by’.⁶⁹ Owen Davies also remarks that as late as 1827, Mary Nichols of Abergavenny had been apprehended by a superstitious mob which, ‘fancying a witch was furnished with an unnatural teat . . . stripped her down to the waste [*sic*] and searched for it’.⁷⁰

Believing superstition to be a manifestly oppressive force, Coleridge, I contend, was growing increasingly concerned about Wordsworth’s deployment of popular magic as a vehicle for social empowerment, and, by implication, reform. In ‘Slavery and Superstition in the Supernatural Poems’, Tim Fulford examines the psychology behind superstition as a form of mental enslavement. In a November 1794 letter to Southey, Coleridge wrote that ‘A willing slave is the worst of slaves! His soul is a slave’.⁷¹ Fulford points to the challenge to colonialist stereotypes offered in the seventh stanza of ‘Religious Musings’, suggesting that people were complicit in their own oppression (and those of the colonies) by unquestioningly ‘worshipping the Gods their political masters chose for them’:

⁶⁸ See Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 509.

⁶⁹ William Forbes, quoted in Boyd, *Justices of the Peace*, p. 467.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 10 April 1827, quoted in Davies, *Witchcraft Magic and Culture*, p. 184.

⁷¹ Quoted in Fulford, ‘Slavery and Superstition’, p. 45.

The superstitious natives are not the peoples of Mexico and Africa, but the Britons who, in their lust for or complicity with wealth and power, murder and enslave across the globe.⁷²

Fulford argues that 'in proportion to their own powerlessness, subjugated peoples granted others powers that *seemed* supernatural' and that 'unscrupulous tyrants took advantage of this tendency to cement their authority; they ensured those they oppressed stayed spellbound by their power'.⁷³ Of course, this pathology was not unique to the inhabitants of the colonies. Nor was it restricted to a pre-enlightenment era. The same system of 'mental enslavement' was evident in the superstitions that Coleridge witnessed during his residence in rural Somersetshire, which remained a very real threat for many people, and were predicated on the same systems of fear, subordination and reliance. *The Conjuror of Ruabon* reveals that the Welsh peasantry consulted cunning man Mochyn-y-Nant as an oracle 'in whose judgement they placed the most implicit confidence',⁷⁴ and (Lemoine's ironies notwithstanding) *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Dick Spot the Conjuror* demonstrated the power that unquestioning members of the community ascribed to cunning folk:

The truth is attested by many respectable witnesses, both in town and in country; proving, that every thing belonging to the history of this wonderful

⁷² Fulford, 'Slavery and Superstition', p. 46.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 46.

⁷⁴ *The Conjuror of Ruabon*, p. 3.

man [Richard Morris, a.k.a., Dick Spot] was beyond the settled rules by which human actions and the ways of man are in general regulated.⁷⁵

Some cunning folk were acutely aware of their position of power, and manipulated their role for personal (usually financial) gain. As the 1809 pamphlet *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman* reveals, the perception of an 'ill-wish' left untreated by a magical practitioner could slowly eat away at the afflicted person's imagination. Mary Bateman would administer protective charms to clients who thought themselves to be under the influence of a malign spell:

The charms were put in the *bed*; in that place where of all others, they were most likely to operate on the minds of her dupes, or her victims. Here during the silent watches of the night, when the mind is most susceptible of frightful ideas, the unhappy people would, reclining their bodies on the charm, rivet the fantasies [*sic*] it conjured up, so strongly in their imaginations, as to make them immovable.⁷⁶

The anonymous author of the pamphlet states that 'terror was the great engine by which [Mary Bateman] carried on her frauds' – a reality that, for Coleridge, was

⁷⁵ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, p. 36.

⁷⁶ *The Extraordinary Life and Character of Mary Bateman*, p. 22.

applicable in equal measure to the Obeah of the West Indies and to forms of pre-enlightenment diabolism surviving in contemporary British popular magic belief.

Fulford's essay allows us to gauge the radical position informing Coleridge's mistrust of superstition. The government had a 'talismanic' hold over their subjects: 'belief in the rightful power of Church and State was Britain's Obeah'. Coleridge's view of the talismanic force of the curse and other inveigling hexes in the contemporary economy of popular magic is precisely the same concern operating at a different scalar level. Throughout the 1790s, following Burke's *Reflections*, an order of patriarchal chivalric control continued to be appealed to as the bulwark against radical destabilisation. However, patriarchal control is at the very heart of Christabel's suffering, and superstition is the vehicle by which its system covertly operates. The expectations and constrictions placed on the repressed (oppressed) Christabel by this social system ensure her powerlessness, and her subservience to Geraldine is the product of a patriarchal system in which power is achieved through the subjugation of others. By observing (even desiring) Geraldine's exposed, diabolic form ('a sight to dream of, not to tell' – a radical other whose existence outside the pale of the constricting systems of her society's patriarchal norms render her both dangerous and alluring),⁷⁷ Christabel becomes guiltily complicit in a certain occult knowledge:

⁷⁷ There is an extensive critical debate regarding the sexual dynamics of Christabel, see, for instance, Jonas Spatz, 'The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge's 'Christabel'', *PMLA*, 90 (January 1975), pp. 107–16; Camille Paglia, 'Christabel', *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 217–29; Susan S. Lanser, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565–1830* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Ellen Brinks, *Gothic Masculinity: Effeminacy and the Supernatural in English and German Romanticism* (London: Associated University Press, 2003).

Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,

This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow.⁷⁸

As Fulford argues, 'contact with this uncanny body spellbinds Christabel, who falls into a sexual knowledge which, as a woman who identifies herself as an innocent and dutiful daughter, she is unable to accept as anything other than guilt and sin'.⁷⁹ 'Guilt and sin': the longstanding interpretation of 'Christabel' as Christian allegory is here hybridised by an attention to the sexual politics of the poem; 'Christabel' can be further layered by viewing the tale in the context of the power structures embodied in contemporary cultures of the occult as instantiations, in Coleridge's assessment, of wider tyrannies in the nation's political life. Guilt-ridden and stripped of her innocence after Geraldine reveals the 'mark of her shame' (a sort of demonic as well as sexual awakening) Christabel, too, is othered within her own society – one that values the female only as wife or virginal maiden. The very space of the castle, heraldically tricked out, acts as a constant reminder of her entrapment. What we may now refer to as the 'white' magic connected with Christabel's mother is perceived to be entirely benevolent. However, this immersion in superstition merely works to make Christabel more susceptible to Geraldine's curse. For Coleridge, liberation of mind cannot be achieved through the perpetuation of guilt-ridden fear or mental enslavement. Far from empowering its practitioners and agents, magical practice and belief actually worked further to disenfranchise them – incarcerating them in the same limiting

⁷⁸ Coleridge, 'Christabel', ll. 269-70.

⁷⁹ Fulford, 'Slavery and Superstition', p. 56.

systems that allowed despotic, patriarchal systems of control to maintain their grasp over subjects' reformist imaginations.

Coleridge's attitude to popular magic and superstition ensured that his poems would not fully align with the direction of *Lyrical Ballads*. Indeed, 'Christabel' can be seen as a reversal of the Wordsworthian spell poem. 'Goody Bake and Harry Gill', 'The Mad Mother' and 'The Thorn' are all, to some extent, poems that focus on disenfranchised women who embrace an occult identity in order to afford some measure of emancipation from the communities that have isolated and marginalised them. Like the mother-in-law of 'The Three Graves', however, the mysterious Geraldine is by no means financially disenfranchised. She is 'richly clad', dressed in fine silk, wears jewels in her hair, and assures Christabel that 'my sire is of a noble line'.⁸⁰ Her elegance is a far cry from the poor, struggling existence of Goody Blake who is forced to steal simply to survive. Nor is Geraldine portrayed as powerless. In a poem that has at its heart, as already noted, issues of voice and the (in)ability to speak, Geraldine dominates the speech of Part I, speaking 60 lines compared to Christabel's 28. As Anya Taylor has argued,

Geraldine, a ventriloquist or improvisatrice, assumes numerous voices, sighing in sweet weakness, speaking to spirits, summoning powers, vibrating magical force. Her different voices multiply while Christabel's go mute.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Coleridge, 'Christabel', l. 77.

⁸¹ Anya Taylor, 'Coleridge's "Christabel" and the Phantom Soul', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 42.4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 707–30, p. 713.

In Part II of the poem, written in 1800, Geraldine's spell proves to be – as Geraldine said it would – 'lord of [Christabel's] utterance'; it removes Christabel's ability to articulate herself freely, taking control of her speech:

'What ails then my beloved child?'

The Baron said – His daughter mild

Made answer, 'All will yet be well!'

I ween, she had no power to tell

Aught else: so mighty was the spell.⁸²

The silencing of Christabel is a display of dominance. Geraldine remains consistently in command of her own voice and that of her victim. While Wordsworth's disenfranchised characters deploy performative utterances to redress social inequities in personal contexts (Goody Blake reduces Harry Gill's speech to the sound of chattering teeth; Martha Ray takes possession of village gossips' tongues as they repeat her woeful spell), this is not the demonic appropriation of another's speech. Goody Blake and Martha Ray are society's victims, employing the occult as a form of empowerment and carefully manipulating the otherwise negative consequences of

⁸² Coleridge, 'Christabel', l. 462-6.

local gossip into a form of advantageous independence. The motives behind Geraldine's curse, however, are unclear. As Owen Davies argues, while malign witches were often believed to cast evil spells as a form of revenge, their attacks were frequently perceived to be unmotivated, 'stimulated by the sheer pleasure of causing pain and hardship'.⁸³ Geraldine's spell is destructive and is deployed as little more than a tool for selfish, individualist desire.

Thus in Coleridge's 1798 'curse' poetry, popular magic is seen as a limiting and dangerous phenomenon, which ensured their misalignment with Wordsworth's project in *Lyrical Ballads*. In 'Christabel', Coleridge explores the psychological pressures of guilt, fear and subordination that cause Christabel to be ensnared and silenced by the witch-like Geraldine. As with the victims of bewitchment encountered both in the colonies and in Britain, it is Christabel's insertion in a damaging cycle of fear, superstition and powerlessness that allows Geraldine's curse to have its effect.

This is not to suggest, however, that 'Christabel' is an uncomplicated articulation of revolutionary radicalism. That reading is, of course, problematised by Coleridge's complex calibration of his plural, shifting politico-moral identity towards the end of the 1790s. By 1798, Coleridge came to believe that dangerously fanatical rhetoric, together with touchstones that lacked the 'fixed principles' that he increasingly associated with personal morality, had been employed by both radical and reactionary camps. As noted above, Geraldine uses her occult power to control Christabel's power of speech; 'touched' by guilt, Christabel is unable to express her fear, to the point that in Part II her voice is reduced to a serpentine 'hiss'. Coleridge

⁸³ Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 206.

himself, I argue, that he had fallen victim to a similar occultation of speech in making the prophetic pronouncements of 'Ode on the Departing Year'. Coleridge's representation of Christabel represents his sense of his own earlier radical beguilement – an association between (misplaced) political ideology and popular magic that he would make in 'The Ancient Mariner'. His concerns regarding fanatical language and the 'juggler's charms' that precipitated it would be revisited in 'Fears in Solitude' and 'France: An Ode', to which 'Christabel' becomes an important companion piece.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner – Wordsworthian Genetics

As is well known, in late 1797 and early 1798, Coleridge and Wordsworth embarked on a joint project to compose a lengthy poem (initially conceived while walking to Lynton on 13 November 1797) inspired by the tale of a superstitious seaman in George Shelvocke's *A Voyage Round the World by the Way of the Great South Sea* (1726).⁸⁴ Shortly after Coleridge assumed sole responsibility for 'The Ancient Mariner', Wordsworth revealed his plans for *Lyrical Ballads*, which was to include Coleridge's poem.⁸⁵ However, as has often been remarked, 'The Ancient Mariner' does not fit comfortably within the manifesto of the volume. Indeed, the poem itself is a continuously self-ironising text, full of internal contradictions, and would be reworked by Coleridge many times over the course of his career. My reading of 'The Ancient

⁸⁴ George Shelvocke, *A voyage round the world by way of the great South Sea: perform'd in the years 1719, 20, 21, 22* (London: J. Senex, 1726).

⁸⁵ My reading of the text is based on the 1798 version of 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' that was published in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as I am offering the poem as an important precursor to Coleridge's 1798 quarto. I shall refer to this 1798 version of the text as 'The Ancient Mariner' from this point.

Mariner' seeks to explore the anomalous position of the poem at the head of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. My investigation first seeks to reveal that, while Coleridge alluded to what he had read about the shaman of the colonies in the accounts of Hearne and Edwards, and to mesmerist practice (as several critics have argued), the mariner's heterogeneous character can also be partly attributed to the cunning folk operating closer to home – illuminating the Wordsworthian genetics of the mariner. With this in mind, I suggest that, once he assumed sole responsibility for the poem, Coleridge steered the work in a direction that demonstrated and dramatised his continuing inability wholeheartedly to ally himself with Wordsworth's investment in the material occult, which were gathering apace as both 'The Thorn' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' were being composed.

Wordsworth's account of the poem's creation exposes its collaborative origins. 'Much the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention', he wrote, 'but certain parts I myself suggested . . . We began the composition together, on that to me memorable evening.' However, this collaboration was to be short-lived:

As we endeavoured to proceed conjointly (I speak of the same evening) our respective manners proved so widely different, that it would have been quite presumptuous in me to do anything but separate from an undertaking upon which I could have only been a clog.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Quoted in Henry Duff Traill, *Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 50–1.

Despite Coleridge taking sole responsibility for the work soon after its conception, Wordsworth's recollections expose his contributions to the genetics of the mariner, and reveal his origins in relation to the other poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*. The 'hangover' of Wordsworth's influence can be glimpsed in the character of the mariner; particularly in those elements that can be traced back to British cultures of popular magic. I suggest that the mariner may also owe some part of his character's conception to British cunning men. As an aged 'lank and lean' old man, the mariner's physical disadvantages are well documented in the poem. Despite this, however, the young wedding guest is restrained, powerlessly entranced, while the ancient man spins his mysterious yarn. The same inversion of hierarchical social stratification that arises in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' and 'The Thorn' is at play here. The guest refers to the mariner as a 'grey-beard Loon' (l. 15) – an insult that carries a social connotation and firmly identifies its recipient as being of lower rank.⁸⁷ The wedding guest's fear of his perceived power facilitates the interruption of a normative social occasion: a wedding. As in 'The Thorn', a complete demystification or evacuation of popular magic would condemn the mariner to a state of victimhood – an aged man who exists isolated on the very edges of his community. However, (although he remains himself, within the logic of his own narrative, as 'cursed') the ancient sailor receives a certain power from his suffering – his 'strange power of speech' which allows him to disseminate his cautionary tale. Like Martha Ray's haunting cries, the mariner's tale 'infects' the wedding guest (and every other person he has stopped over many years), 'bewitching' his auditor to rise 'a sadder and a wiser man' the

⁸⁷ The OED entry for 'loon' reads 'A boor, lout, clown; an untaught, ill-bred person'. See 'Loon n.1', *OED Online* (June 2006), <<http://www.oed.com/view/entry/110159?rskey=zDcbQv&result=1>>, [accessed 27 June 2016].

following morning. By interrupting the wedding feast (an opulent occasion) the mariner disseminates (what appears to be) an evangelical moral promoting enlightened social awareness. The final lines of 'The Ancient Mariner' thus have the potential to fit comfortably into the social manifesto of the *Lyrical Ballads* project and integrate the poem more comfortably into the overall design of the volume.

As noted in my introduction, there has been a long-standing critical debate linking Coleridge's mariner and Romantic-period pseudo-scientific cultures of mesmerism. The mariner has been identified as both the receiver of a mesmeric power, and himself a potential mesmerist – both patient and practitioner.⁸⁸ We have seen that Fulford sees the mariner as 'ow[ing] his being to what Coleridge had read about shamans and their European cousins – mesmerists'. In a reading keyed into the transatlantic dynamic of *Lyrical Ballads*, Fulford portrays the mariner as representative of a political modality of mesmerism: he is both a victim and a practitioner of the dangerous superstition that lends mesmerism its power.⁸⁹ I suggest, however, that the mariner also evinces the genetics of a Wordsworthian cunning man – an aspect of his character that encodes the collaborative genesis of the text.

The material contexts of mesmerism and popular magic were, of course, inextricably entwined, and thus my reading by no means displaces readings of the

⁸⁸ See, for instance, Lane Cooper, *The Power of the Eye in Coleridge* (1910), <<http://archive.org/stream/cu31924073804175#page/n7/mode/2up>> [accessed 9 October 2012]; Charles J. Rzepka, 'Recollecting Spontaneous Overflows: Romantic Passions, the Sublime and Mesmerism', *Romantic Passions* (April 1998), <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/passions/rzepka/rzp.html>> [accessed 9 October 2012]; Eric G. Wilson, 'Matter and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism' *Philosophy and Literature*, 30.2 (2006); Tim Fulford, 'Conducting the Vital Fluid: The Politics and Poetics of Mesmerism in the 1790s', *Studies in Romanticism*, 43.1 (2004), pp. 57–78.

⁸⁹ Fulford, 'Conducting the Vital Fluid', p. 74.

mariner as mesmerist (indeed, the practices of mesmerism and popular magic were in many respects interlinked, as discussed in my introduction). Rather, I hope to enhance our sense of the network of material occult contexts out of which 'The Ancient Mariner' emerged by offering an alternative interpretation keyed into the complex relationship – the points of contact and of contrast – between these two modalities of material occult practice. Mesmerism was typically a social exercise. Alison Winter's history of mesmerism notes that during a typical mesmeric séance, 'a group of witnesses would assemble, in numbers ranging from a few people in a parlour to thousands in a crowded hall'.⁹⁰ Private mesmerist consultations would typically take place in the patient's home, or in specially designed hospitals or infirmaries.⁹¹ The mariner, however, is keen to be alone with the wedding guest – he 'stoppeth one of three' (l. 2), letting the other two guests continue. The wedding guest invites the mariner to perform his tale for the other guests: 'Nay, if thou'st got a laughsome tale, / Marinere! come with me' (ll. 11–2). The mariner ignores his request and continues to tell his story to the lone wedding guest. If the mariner were indeed a type of mesmerist, he would have chosen to perform his act within the wedding feast itself, where he would be guaranteed an audience. The poem also suggests that, aside from placing his hand on the wedding guest's arm, the mariner holds his young charge with no more force beyond that of his 'glittering eye'. Winter highlights the 'extensive bodily contact of eighteenth-century mesmerism' as opposed to the magnetic 'passes' of Victorian mesmerists⁹² – suggesting that the mesmerism Coleridge would have

⁹⁰ Alison Winter, *Mesmerised: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁹¹ Winter, *Mesmerised*, p. 138.

⁹² *Ibid.*

known when he wrote 'The Ancient Mariner' would have been a predominantly *physical* act. Indeed, the poem may pre-date the mesmeric modes that used eye contact alone. The motive of the mesmerist-mariner is also unclear. Mesmerism was originally developed as a scientific cure for various illnesses, ranging from hysteria to epilepsy, and 'the goal was almost always the alleviation of pain and the cure of disease'.⁹³ The wedding guest shows no sign of being affected by any previous malady. Typical consultations would be sought by the patient herself, and the mesmerist would have been known to her – either through a previous encounter, or through advertisements:

People usually approached a mesmerist only after seeing a series of public demonstrations or conferring with others who had. Lecturers displayed calling cards and advertising sheets at their shows and supplemented them with advertisements in the local papers.⁹⁴

However, the poem bears no traces of this protocol. The wedding guest displays no prior knowledge of the old man, and the mariner refers to the guest as a 'stranger' (l. 49) suggesting that this was either a chance encounter, or one organised by a third party. Despite the lack of evidence suggesting that such transactions ever actually took place, it was certainly believed that cunning men were often hired by customers to target other members of their community, and to perform specific tasks using

⁹³ Ibid., p. 139.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 138.

bewitchment – perhaps, as one reading of the poem could suggest, to prevent a wedding (or normative social ceremony) from taking place. The wedding in the 1798 version of the poem is profoundly ambiguous, and has been little commented on. Coleridge's marginal gloss, added in 1817, informs us that 'three Gallants' are 'bidden to a wedding feast',⁹⁵ but this information is absent from previous editions of the text. It is not clear whether the wedding guest is interrupted from attending the wedding ceremony itself, or the celebratory wedding feast.

While the distinctions between these precise social occasions remain somewhat blurred, however, the purpose of the mariner is clear: a social ceremony (if not the wedding itself) is somehow being balked. Cunning folk could be hired to perform a seemingly infinite number of obscure tasks, and love was an area of particular interest in the cunning trade. Owen Davies records instances of women visiting cunning men to 'inspire' their lovers to propose to them, or to draw up 'magical contracts' that ensured the propriety of their new husband's behaviour.⁹⁶ It is perfectly possible that a cunning man may have been approached to perform the opposite task – to prevent two people from entering into a hetero-normative relationship:

John Parkins [a cunning man operating in the 1820s], displaying his usual commercial acumen, not only dealt in bringing men and women together but also in keeping them apart. His fourth lamen was constructed to 'most

⁹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1817)', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul H. Fry (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 27.

⁹⁶ Davies, *Popular Magic*, pp. 101-2.

powerfully protect and defend any lady against all the various powers of seduction, insult, etc. and also from the malignant grasp of the most atrocious and abandoned libertine, at all times and places whatsoever'.⁹⁷

With this in mind, I suggest that it is possible to read these aspects of the mariner's character as bearing traces of Wordsworth's interest in popular magic.

A Platform for Debate

Having launched into 'The Ancient Mariner' as a joint venture, Wordsworth claimed that the project had to be completed by Coleridge alone because they 'pulled different ways' – a divergence that can be explained, I suggest, by the conflict between the two poets' discordant negotiations of popular magic. The 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* saw 'The Ancient Mariner' displaced from its seminal position at the front of the collection. In a note published alongside the poem in the 1800 volume, Wordsworth (infamously) saw the mariner-protagonist as having

⁹⁷ Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning folk in English History* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p. 102.

no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural.⁹⁸

Coleridge took the poem in a direction that struggled to fit comfortably within the poetic scope and social investments of *Lyrical Ballads*.

As noted, 'The Ancient Mariner' is identified by Brett and Jones as being part of a 'curse cycle' of poetry along with 'The Three Graves', 'Peter Bell' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. However, given the poem's self-reflexiveness and multiple layers, it is difficult to separate and identify the individual curses at work within the poem. 'The Ancient Mariner' is a complex palimpsest of voices (even before the addition of the gloss in *Sibylline Leaves*) and in order to identify the various workings and modalities of cursing that feature in the poem, it is necessary to tease apart its narrative layers. As outlined in Chapter 1, spells were a performative, often theatrical, act. Cunning folk adopted the appropriate garments, decorated their homes with impressive scholarly materials, and adopted dramatic modes of speech to inspire wonder in their clients (De Qunicey's depiction of Mochyn y Nant, who launched dramatically into the writer's horoscope mid-sentence, can interestingly be compared to the mariner's abrupt intra-tale pronouncement, 'There was a ship'). The mariner prevents the wedding guest ('one of three') from attending a wedding celebration, and he succeeds in doing so by theatrically telling him a strange, mysterious and sensationalist story.

⁹⁸ William Wordsworth, 'Wordsworth's Note to *Ancient Mariner* in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)', *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 791.

The seafaring tale of the death of an albatross and the ensuing curse placed on its murderer is itself a spoken charm, cast by the mariner to bewitch the wedding guest and hold him 'like a three year's child' (l. 19) – a display of his 'strange power of speech' (l. 634). The spoken word is central to the spells in *Lyrical Ballads*, as discussed in Chapter 3. For Goody Blake to curse Harry Gill, for instance, it was necessary for him to have 'heard what she had said'. Coleridge had used the same trope in 'The Three Graves', as the voice of the mother-in-law is 'audible' above that of the vicar during the Communion Service. Alongside these poems, the emphasis in the 'frame' of 'The Ancient Mariner' on the dynamics of telling and hearing ('he cannot chuse but hear') is amplified.

Aside from the 'bewitching' of the wedding guest by the mariner (which provides the narrative 'frame'), all of the supernatural, fantastical elements of the poem are contained within the mariner's tale. The mariner's tale is set on a vast ocean, but focuses on a very small and contained community of people – the men on board ship. The crew constitute 200 ('five times forty') men, including the mariner's own nephew, living and working in an enclosed and highly stressed all-male environment. Sailors had a particular reputation for being superstitious (which is perhaps unsurprising, given the level of risk involved in their profession). One of the many services that cunning men offered was to ensure the safe journeys of ships, or to denote 'lucky' days on which setting sail would be fortuitous. Shropshire-based cunning man Richard Morris, for instance, is recorded as having been frequently consulted by merchants on matters concerning sea voyages, indicating the importance of popular magic in the commercial economy of maritime affairs: 'if he told them that

the ship would arrive safe and return safe, they made themselves easy and enjoyed a calm of mind unknown to an anxious uncertainty'.⁹⁹ Perhaps it should come as no surprise that (as Coleridge would later claim) the supernatural ballad sold so briskly among sailors in 1798.¹⁰⁰ I argue that the company on board ship provided Coleridge with the opportunity to explore the psychological dynamics at work within an enclosed community that believes in (and relies on) cultures of popular magic, and the effect that this has on an individual marginalised as scapegoat.

On the first sighting of the albatross, while the ship is being drawn into the isolated freezing regions of the Antarctic, the crewmen immediately allegorise the bird as having a particular religious significance:

And an it were a Christian Soul,

We hail'd it in God's name.¹⁰¹

However, when the albatross is killed, the crew, who remain at the mercy of the changeable weather, desperately attempt to impose meaning onto the event. The bird is initially hailed as a 'the Bird / That made the Breeze to blow'. However, as soon as the fog and mist begin to clear, the men celebrate the death of the bird:

⁹⁹ *The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ See Paul Fry, 'Biographical and Historical Contexts', p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 63-4.

Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird

That brought the fog and mist.

'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay

That bring the fog and mist.¹⁰²

The men are implicated in the mariner's violent and needless crime, blindly following each other in a collective misuse of predictive signs. By killing the bird, and thus seemingly catalysing this chain of supernatural events, the crew regard the actions of the mariner as the evocation of a supernatural curse:

And I had done an hellish thing

And it would work 'em woe:

For all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird

That made the Breeze to blow.¹⁰³

The 'hellish' actions of the mariner associate him with diabolic magic. As a result of killing the albatross, and thus violating a natural taboo, he is averred among the crew as an occult figure. His occult identity allowed the mariner a measure of respect when

¹⁰² Ibid., ll. 95-8.

¹⁰³ Ibid., ll. 89-92.

the weather was fair ('Twas right, said they, such birds to slay / That bring the fog and mist'), but as soon as the luck of the crew begins to turn he becomes a pariah. The mariner becomes an ambiguous presence – within, but not of, the ship's community; it is a position that would have been familiar to the cunning man, as revealed in Chapter 2.

As the weather takes various turns throughout the course of their voyage, Coleridge deploys a wide range of popular beliefs to denote the dramatic intensification of the crew's superstition. Every event, no matter how arbitrary, is given significance by these predictive signs. The water is compared to 'a witch's oils' in an allusion to the witches in *Macbeth*, who had cursed a mariner with drought, insomnia and shipwreck.¹⁰⁴ Some members of the crew engage in dream interpretation (a service commonly offered by cunning folk and the subject of several instructional texts during the period),¹⁰⁵ believing themselves bewitched by the angered Polar Spirit:

And some in dreams assured were

Of the Spirit that plagued us so . . .¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ See the notes to 'The Ancient Mariner' in the edition edited by Paul H. Fry, p.36.

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, *Every Lady's Own Fortune-Teller, or an Infallible Guide to the Hidden Decrees of Fate, being a New and Regular System for Foretelling Future Events, Astrology, Physiognomy, Palmistry, Moles Cards and Dreams, to which is Added a New Method of Fortune-Telling by the Dregs of Coffee* (London: J. Roach, 1791); *The New Infallible Fortune Teller; or, a Just Interpretation of Dreams and Moles* (Edinburgh, 1818). For more information on dream interpretation see Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736-1951*, pp. 137-9

¹⁰⁶ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 127-8.

The electrostatic weather phenomenon. St Elmo's fire, which caused the light that 'danc'd' on the ship's rigging, is invoked as an omen commonly thought to portend disaster. The portent reappears later in the poem as the 'dark red shadows' flicker across the ship, at the moment the mariner registers with 'fear and dread' the corpses of the crew:

They lifted up their stiff right arms,
They held them straight and tight;
And each right-arm burnt like a torch,
A torch that's borne upright.¹⁰⁷

John Livingston Lowes suggests that these lines (deleted after 1798) may reference the 'Hand of Glory' – a candle, crafted using the fat of a hanged man which, when lit, was said to 'stupefy those to whom it was presented, and to render them motionless'.¹⁰⁸ It was popularly believed to have been employed by thieves to avoid detection when breaking into houses. Lowes summons a wide range of texts potentially known by Coleridge that make reference to the superstition, and Southey

¹⁰⁷ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 503-6.

¹⁰⁸ Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary: with a Collection of Popular Superstitions* (London: Edward Jeffery, 1811), pp. 73-5.

spoke about it at length in his notes to *Thalaba* in 1799 – convincingly suggesting that Coleridge may well have been aware of the tale.¹⁰⁹

The bird, hung around the neck of the mariner as an ironic cross, becomes a talisman or cursed object. Again, this is a practice that has its roots in contemporary popular magic. Cunning folk produced talismans to perform a range of different tasks; from protecting against malign magic to combating disease. These objects ranged from written charms (often quoting pieces of scripture) that would typically be worn on the client's person, to a wide array of 'charmed' items that would be secreted in people's homes as a means of protection against witchcraft.¹¹⁰ Coleridge is likely to have been familiar with similar practices given his association with the talisman-maker and seller William Gilbert.¹¹¹ The albatross becomes the physical marker of the mariner's expulsion from the ship's community.

After the appearance of Death and Life in Death (not yet named in the 1798 version), both crew and mariner observe another omen in the form of the horned moon. This astrological portent is alluded to in a handwritten note by Coleridge: 'It is a common superstition among sailors that something evil is about to happen whenever a star dogs the moon'.¹¹² It is Wordsworth who alerts us to the name by which Coleridge himself knew and conceptualised his mariner: 'the old navigator, as Coleridge afterwards delighted to call him' – that is, a stargazer.¹¹³ As a navigator, the

¹⁰⁹ See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 509-11, n. 60.

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, the practice of horseshoes nailed to walls, which was believed to be a means of magical protection in *The Wonderful Life and Remarkable Trial of Mary Bateman*, p. 17.

¹¹¹ Gilbert's skill as a talisman maker was advertised in *The Conjuror's Magazine* (January 1792).

¹¹² 'The Ancient Mariner', p. 42.

¹¹³ Traill, *Coleridge*, p.50.

mariner would have read the night skies scientifically to determine the ship's geographical location based on the position of the stars. However, while navigators used the 'fixed' stars as an astronomical map, astrologers also claimed to predict weather conditions and the success of a voyage by reading the movement of the sun, moon and planets (or 'erratiques'). In July 1792 *The Conjuror's Magazine* published 'On the Event of Ships'.¹¹⁴ This article, taken from John Gadbury's *Nauticum Astrologicum* (1710) instructed readers how to draw 'elections':

Among all the parts of astrology (since the Notable and most useful Art of Navigation hath been so Eminently improved) there is none to be found more particularly necessary and profitable, for the adventurous Merchants and Seamen . . . than that of Elections.¹¹⁵

Elections read the positions of the erratiques to determine the optimum time for a ship to leave on a major voyage. Gadbury's tract provided seamen and merchants with basic astrological instructions to determine whether a ship's safe return could be ensured:

¹¹⁴ *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (July 1792), p. 470.

¹¹⁵ John Gadbury, *Nauticum Astrologicum: or, the astrological seaman: directing merchants, mariners, captains of ships, ensurers, &c. how (by God's blessing) they may escape divers dangers which commonly happen in the ocean. Unto which is added a diary of the weather for XXI years together, exactly observed in London, with sundry observations thereon* (London: George Sawbridge, 1710), p. 1.

An election, in an Astrological Sence, is the serious and exact choice of a Genuine and Proper time, wherein we may (by God's assistance) according to the Energy and Influence of Second Causes, begin, or attempt, any matter or business of eminent weight and consideration, prosperously and to good effect. Or, more concisely, is the chusing of a good and favourable Position of Heaven, and the shunning of a bad one, in our commencement of any eminent or weighty Affair, relating to humane Life.¹¹⁶

The mariner, now fully immersed in the superstitions of his crewmen, reads the star-dogged moon as an astrological portent rather than astronomical marker. With this in mind, he perceives as a curse the evil looks of the community from which he has been marginalised:

Each turn'd his face with a ghastly pang

And curs'd me with his ee.¹¹⁷

It is difficult from this point to decipher just how much of the events of the tale are 'real' (the poem's perennial challenge) and to separate a material 'reality' from the mariner's guilt-addled dream or hallucination, given that the poem refuses to orientate the reader with any externally authorised grounding perspectives. Plagued

¹¹⁶ Gadbury, *Nauticum Astrologicum*, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 216-7.

by his own fearful guilt, the mariner perceives himself to be (and, by the power of this idea working on the imagination, *becomes*) a cursed individual. As in Coleridge's other curse poetry, the 'spell' is granted efficacy by the victim's guilt and his complete marginalisation – both from his own community and from God. Quoting Forbes, Robert Boyd reveals that a bewitched man would be 'exceedingly tormented at the saying of prayers and graces' and, as in 'The Three Graves' and 'The Wanderings of Cain', the mariner's state is similarly registered as an inability to pray:

A wicked whisper came and made

My heart as dry as dust.¹¹⁸

At several moments in the poem the mariner is presented with opportunities to 'dispell' his curse: in particular, the blessing of the water snakes and the shriving of his soul by the hermit. However, by the end of the poem the mariner remains cursed by his pathological need to retell his tale, and it is clear that the now long-internalised spell is not lifted. Momentarily distracted by the 'rich attire' of the water snakes (as was Christabel with snakelike Geraldine), the mariner forgets his guilt and 'bless'd them unaware'. Realising what he had just done, the mariner, who was 'sure my kind saint look pity on me', feels his guilt alleviated – demonstrated by the fall of the talismanic albatross and his reclaimed ability to pray. However, the mariner's joyful regard of the 'slimy things' mirrors the identification of the albatross as a 'Christian

¹¹⁸ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 248-9.

Soul' from the beginning of the tale – the original catalyst of the crew's superstition. The mariner is not educated out of superstition and out of wider incarcerating paradigms of belief, and his redemptive actions are little more than equally impotent counter-spells.

The cyclical nature of the poem is apparent at this point. Superstition has become an all-consuming, infectious, self-perpetuating force. The mariner is completely entrenched within the superstitious belief system of his crewmates. His guilt and fear are not fully alleviated, his superstition goes unchecked and, as a result, his curse (as he perceives it) continues:

The pang, the curse, with which they died,

Had never pass'd away:

I could not draw my een from theirs

Ne turn them up to pray.¹¹⁹

Suddenly, however, in opening line of the next stanza, the mariner exclaims that 'the spell was snapt'. This time, there is no action taken on the part of the mariner to effect this change – yet as readers we (along with the mariner) are left searching for the act behind this otherwise random event. Of course, the event (and the universe of the poem) *is* random; but by this point, the reader has been interpellated, hailed (along

¹¹⁹ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll.453-6.

with the mariner, and, in turn, the wedding guest) into a world of superstitious expectation. The wind picks up, the ship moves forth and the mariner's ability to pray returns again.

Paul Fry has suggested that 'Coleridge, or "the author", as we may call him, makes himself felt as yet another separate voice through the literary variations – the stretched stanzas of five or six lines and more – that he imposes on the regularity of an oral poet's ballad quatrain'.¹²⁰ One such occasion marks Coleridge's self-aware acknowledgement of the blinding superstition into which both mariner and reader have been led:

Like one, that on a lonely road

Doth walk in fear and dread,

And having once turn'd round, walks on

And turns no more his head:

Because he knows, a frightful fiend

Doth close behind him tread.¹²¹

Re-focused away from the social empowerment of the rural lower classes, the poem instead registers the *entrapment* of individuals and communities in systems of

¹²⁰ Paul H. Fry, 'Biographical and Historical Contexts', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul H. Fry (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 3-25, p.18.

¹²¹ Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', ll. 461-6.

superstition, driven by fear and guilt. The punishment of the mariner is an everlasting curse that ensures that he has to re-live the horrors of which he tells over and over again. In his notebooks, Coleridge attested to the continuing retribution visited on the mariner:

It is an enormous blunder to represent the An. M. as an old man on board ship. He was in my mind the everlasting wandering Jew – had told this story ten thousand times since the voyage, which was in his early youth and 50 years before.¹²²

The mariner – now fully immersed in a cycle of superstition – perceives himself compelled to retell his tale, thereby spreading the infection yet further. He is both the object and author of his own further entrapment; unable to escape, partly because his identity as ‘occult’ figure is the only thing that he believes affords him power – and, in a move contrary to that in ‘Christabel’, the very ability to speak – in each new superstitious community. This power (like the curses in ‘The Three Graves’ and ‘Christabel’) is reliant on the subjugation of others into this system of fear, guilt and superstition. The wedding guest becomes the latest to be so hailed.

The poem closes with an evangelical moral statement, but the message falls flat. The statement ‘He prayeth best who loveth best / All things both great and small’ becomes little more than yet another charm – similar to the biblical verses that

¹²² MS. Fragment of Table Talk, as quoted in Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, p. 133.

cunning men scrawled onto pieces of parchment and gave to their clients as a means of protection against diabolic magic. For Coleridge, the crafted moral is simply another enforced text, seemingly randomly (and certainly ironically) layered into the tale under the guise of an explanatory key to its meaning.

During the course of 'The Ancient Mariner', Coleridge demonstrates just how easily one can be drawn into superstition and by extension, fanaticism. Of course, Coleridge knew this only too well. The burial of the Wordsworthian cunning man at the heart of the poem exposes an element of the pathological guilt that, as I will argue, had begun to consume Coleridge in 1798. Compelled to disseminate his own warning tale, the poet was struggling to deal with his role as false prophet earlier in the decade. 'The Ancient Mariner' – a poem that registers the dangers of unquestioned belief – usefully reveals the state of mind in which Coleridge laboured when composing the 1798 quarto, *Fears in Solitude*, in which the title poem and 'France: An Ode' (and, in subtle ways, 'Frost at Midnight') are fin-de-siècle palinodes. At a time when he was negotiating the radical reversal of his political views and his former Enthusiasm (which he would associate with blind superstition), Coleridge's scepticism of cultures of popular magic led him away from Wordsworth's deployment of the material occult as a mode for potential social emancipation. 'The Ancient Mariner' thus operates as an apologia, if not guilty apology, for Coleridge's own blind following of political portents earlier in the decade. His former millenarian radicalism, now associated in his mind with Wordsworthian cultures of the material occult, had been revealed as an infectious and dangerous mode of superstition – a covertly oppressive force unsuited to the pursuit and achievement of true liberty. As Peter

Kitson suggests in an article on Coleridge's palinodal moves late in the decade, 'Coleridge argues that a prior, or at least concurrent, moral revolution is vital if there is to be a successful political revolution'.¹²³ Part of this moral revolution requires the sceptical interpretation of fanatical claims of prognostication. Coleridge extended this to his fellow radicals, asking them carefully to consider the actions of an increasingly violently expansionist French Republic, and to accept blame for their own insertion and collusion in local and national systems of despotism that have (to use the language of 'Fears in Solitude') grievously 'offended' the moral order. Coleridge's poetry of 1798 anxiously regarded the proximity between the material occult cultures deployed by Wordsworth and the prophetic fanaticism that he was seeking to disavow.

The Quarto: Recantation

The Coleridge we witness in 1798 was bitterly disappointed by the course of a revolution that had grown increasingly violent and betrayed its initial principles. His life in Stowey was increasingly plagued by intrusions from local gossips and from governmental spies to the extent that he deprecated Thelwall's request to form a triumvirate of like-minded philosophical radicals in Somerset, feeling that the atheist's presence would only spark further controversy. Francis O'Gorman suggests that Coleridge's poetry of the late 1790s

¹²³ Peter Kitson, 'Coleridge, the French Revolution, and "The Ancient Mariner": Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989), pp. 197–207, p. 198.

searched out, nervously, the nuances which separated prediction, prayer, anticipation, prophecy, and the other strange forms of Coleridgean anxiety that wishing the future might somehow impede it, changing its course away from that which was hoped.¹²⁴

An unquestioning belief in a promised vision of the future had led to disappointment. In a letter to George Coleridge in March 1798 (around the same time he was finishing his additions to 'The Three Graves' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'), Coleridge famously claimed that he had 'snapped [his] squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition', stating 'I wish to be a good man & a Christian – but I am no Whig, no Reformist, no Republican'.¹²⁵ His views on religion were also necessarily tested. He began to turn his back on the Unitarianism of his youth, and had begun to adopt a more orthodox ideology by the time he wrote in a letter to his brother that 'I believe most steadfastly in original Sin; that from our mother's wombs our understandings are darkened'.¹²⁶ In September 1798, shortly before he left to begin the proposed two-year stay in Germany with Wordsworth and Dorothy, Coleridge sent three poems to Joseph Johnson to be published in a quarto volume. 'France: An Ode' and 'Fears in Solitude' display varying levels of political explicitness, acting as recantations of his previous radical visions in 'Ode on the Departing Year'. They do so alongside hopeful prophecies concerning his son's future in 'Frost at Midnight'.

¹²⁴ Francis O'Gorman, 'Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight", and Anticipating the Future', *Romanticism*, 14.3 (October 2008), pp. 232–44, p. 233.

¹²⁵ Coleridge, 'To George Coleridge, 10 March 1798', *Letters*, p. 397.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

Written during a sleepless night in February 1798, shortly after the birth of Coleridge's first son, 'Frost at Midnight' seemingly disavows the mistakes of defeated radical parents in the hope that the misplaced beliefs and actions of fathers would not be visited on their sons. Part of that disavowal involves a new kind of presagefulness in the form of prognosticating a hopeful future for his son, free from the guilt of his father's miscalculations. Superstition, however, remains a site of anxiety. Coleridge's own youthful investment in superstition manifests itself in literary form as the poem invokes the miserable, lonely days at Christ's Hospital School following the death of his father, a 'depressed, moping, friendless, poor orphan, half starved', trapped in claustrophobic metropolitan space.¹²⁷ In a moment of isolation (a key theme in his negotiation of curses) the young Coleridge finds a 'companionable form' in the film that flutters on the fire grate:

How oft, at school, with most believing mind,

Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,

To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft

With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt

Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower. . . ¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Quoted in James Gilman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: William Pickering, 1838), p. 12.

¹²⁸ Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', ll. 24-8.

In a note appended to the poem, Coleridge revealed that ‘in all parts of the kingdom these films are called strangers and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend’.¹²⁹ The superstition (which Coleridge would also have known from Cowper’s *Task*) had brought the schoolboy Coleridge comfort. The promise of much-needed companionship in the form of a friend or relative was enough to convince the young and ‘most believing’ Coleridge to turn to superstition in a time of loneliness. However, as Jan Plug has noted, there is an inherent discrepancy between the ‘stranger’ and the ‘friend’ it was understood to portend. ‘What’, he asks, ‘is strange about a friend?’ – one who, to boot, does not arrive.¹³⁰ Superstition is revealed here to be nothing more than a series of empty, arbitrary associations – false signifiers born out of helplessness and desperation out of which Coleridge seeks to educate his own son.

By April 1798, Coleridge was articulating his political disillusionment as the French invaded Switzerland. Originally titled ‘THE RECANTATION, An Ode’ when published in *The Morning Post* (16 April 1798), ‘France: An Ode’ registers Coleridge’s appeal for Liberty’s forgiveness following his failure to read revolutionary promises with sufficient scepticism. As O’Gorman has it:

‘Forgive me, Freedom!’ Coleridge writes, thinking in particular of French suppressions in Switzerland, and admonishing himself for believing uncritically in what would follow 1789 . . . Misplaced hopes suggested the folly of thinking

¹²⁹ Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 515.

¹³⁰ Jan Plug, ‘The Rhetoric of Secrecy: Figure of the Self in “Frost at Midnight”’, *Coleridge’s Visionary Languages*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 27–40, p. 29.

ahead with too clear a sense of how things would develop, a confusion of 'could' and 'should'.¹³¹

Having failed to scrutinise the course of the revolution sceptically, Coleridge was left feeling morally and intellectually compromised. When he included his 1796 poem 'Ode on the Departing Year' in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), he appended a note explaining the context of the poem's composition:

Let it not be forgotten during the perusal of this Ode that it was written many years before the abolition of the slave trade by the British Legislature, likewise before the invasion of Switzerland by the French Republic, which occasioned the Ode that follows ['France: An Ode'], a kind of Palinodia.¹³²

In *Reading Public Romanticism*, Paul Magnuson suggests that 'France: An Ode' is a recantation not of Coleridge's radical politics, but specifically of the prognostication in 'Ode on the Departing Year' that predicts the destruction of England:

¹³¹ O'Gorman, 'Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight", and Anticipating the Future', p. 239.

¹³² Quoted in Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 302.

Coleridge is not recanting an entire set of political principles, which may be difficult to define because of his evasiveness, but a specific section of 'Ode on the Departing Year' that prophesied England's destruction.¹³³

Magnuson contends that in searching for a means to extinguish the political heat that had surrounded him in the anti-Jacobin press, Coleridge recanted his predictions regarding England's downfall. However, the engagement with modes of recantation and prophecy in 'France: An Ode' and the accompanying 'Fears in Solitude' are too complex to be explained as a rejection of any single 'prognostication'. The quarto is another example of the conflicted nature of future-telling within the decade's political discourse.

Like 'Ode on the Departing Year', 'France: An Ode' opens with stargazing. Coleridge reveals his youthful practice of wandering among nature's sublime forms, gazing at the night sky. Here Coleridge had prophesied Liberty's victories:

How oft pursuing fancies holy

My moonlight path o'er flow'ring weeds I wound,

Inspir'd beyond the guess of folly

¹³³ Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 88–9.

By each rude shape, and wild unconquerable sound.¹³⁴

During his starry midnight walks, the French Revolution became a portent of freedom. However, political disappointment later rendered these predictions mere 'fancies'. When France defiantly predicted her own victory – 'Stamp'd her strong foot, and said, she would be free' – Coleridge admitted falling unquestionably under the revolutionary spell:

Unaw'd I sang, amid a slavish band:

And when to whelm the disenchanted nation,

Like fiends embattled by a Wizard's wand,

The Monarchs mov'd in evil day,

And Britain join'd the dire array. . .¹³⁵

Energised by his predictions in 'Ode on the Departing Year', Coleridge 'blest the pæans of deliver'd France' and, enchanted, railed against his own country.¹³⁶ While Coleridge accused monarchs of wizardry, he failed to detect the bewitching prophetic spell

¹³⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'France: An Ode', *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works (Reading Texts) Part 1*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 16 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 462–8, ll. 11–4.

¹³⁵ Coleridge, 'France: An Ode', ll. 27–31.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 140.

woven by the revolutionaries. The similarity between French defiance ('Stamp'd her strong foot') and Coleridge's account of Gilbert's descent into madness ('Madness smote with her hand, and stamped with her feet and swore that he should be hers') suggests that Coleridge may have had the unfortunate astrologer, and modes of occult prediction, in mind when composing 'France: An Ode' – a poem about political, historical, ideological and personal bewitchment that exposes presageful revolutionary spells as a form of distraction and madness. 'France: An Ode' is not merely an apology for some particular misplaced political prediction in 'Ode on the Departing Year'; it is an apology for Coleridge's previous lack of sceptical judgement.

In 'Fears in Solitude', the deceptions of metaphorical, propagandist speech figure as a transformative juggler's charm:

The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
And technical in victories and defeats,
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
Like mere abstractions, empty sound to which

We join no feeling and attach no form!¹³⁷

An appetite for war invades domestic space. Propagandist language casts a political spell, transforming otherwise peaceful citizens into supporters of bloodshed.

Arbitrary, metaphorical relations countermand human sympathy. The Paineite 'universal message' of revolution becomes another illusory misdirection. The blinding promise of some final revolutionary goal (political liberty) blinds radical supporters as false prophecies confused their sense, as O'Gorman states, of what 'could' and 'should' be. As Magnuson notes:

There is little rational discourse, only acts of calculated deception. What is more important, there is no disinterested discourse, no discourse disassociated from a financial or political interest.¹³⁸

Coleridge became concerned that his own predictions in 'Ode on the Departing Year' had themselves contributed to the duping of an 'easily-juggled people'.¹³⁹ In this sense, he stood self-accused of the 'crime' he had attributed to the British Government earlier in the decade. To dispel the spell of misdirection it was necessary

¹³⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Fears in Solitude' *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works (Reading Texts) Part 1*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 16 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), ll. 109–17.

¹³⁸ Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism*, p. 74.

¹³⁹ Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 307.

to arm oneself with an education in recognising the political manipulation that all future-tellers peddled.

This is not to suggest that Coleridge called for a complete rejection of prophetic thought. Recantation may have been the mode of the disappointed radical, but prophecy still represented new hope. However, rather than being pursued as a means of *political* prognostication, the future that was presaged in his late 1790s poetry belonged to the personal sphere. The argument appended to 'France: An Ode' when it was re-published in *The Morning Post* in October 1802 re-established Coleridge's belief that true liberty cannot be directed by a human government:

[T]he poet expresses his conviction, that those feelings, and that grand *ideal*, of freedom, which the mind attains by its contemplation of its individual nature, and of the sublime surrounding objects (see Stanza the First), do not belong to men, as a society, nor can possibly be either gratified, or realised, under any form of human government; but belong to the individual man, so far as he is pure, and inflamed with the love and adoration of God in Nature.¹⁴⁰

In 'France: An Ode' – viewed, now, from the entrenched reactionary perspective of 1802 – Coleridge suggested that the course of true liberty could be followed only by individuals who had received a moral and spiritual education in nature. It became increasingly apparent that, although freedom was the anticipated result of

¹⁴⁰ Coleridge, 'France: An Ode', p. 464,

revolutionary vision, it could not be achieved immediately. As William Gilbert had explained in *The Conjuror's Magazine* a decade before in March 1792, imperfect reality could not always live up to prophetic expectations:

To an obvious remark, that a frost has happened, soon after I said, 'There will be no more frost'; I answer, that it will be seen from a paper, on the Truth, and Importance of Astrology, that the World stands between two disunited, and contrary lights, though in a progress to union. These two are *Spirit* and *Matter*. As the actions of a man's body, may be against the direction of his *mind*, so may the actions of the World and its accidents, be against the *mind* of the World. Till these two lights are united, Astrology, founded on one, must be erroneous in the other.¹⁴¹

In hastily believing the false promises of the French Revolution while under the spell of empty rhetoric, radical supporters (including the Coleridge who meditated on frostiness and the end of frost in 1798) had steered the course of things further away from the anticipated 'perfect' end. An education in the detection and avoidance of political jugglery was vital in avoiding these mistakes, and an education in nature would allow the individual to be guided, patiently, in the course of true liberty. For Coleridge, political liberty needed to begin with the enlightenment of the individual:

¹⁴¹ William Gilbert, *The Conjuror's Magazine*, I (March 1792), p. 336.

as Gilbert suggested, 'a house cannot be held enlightened, where there is a dark corner; no more can a world'.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 341.

Chapter 5: Robert Southey's Conservative Occult

The final chapter of this thesis explores Robert Southey's response to living cultures of popular magic. My focus is the nine months between Southey's first glimpses of Wordsworth and Coleridge's volume in June 1798 and the publication in February of the following year of his own *Poems*, which he had produced at impressive speed. Looking back on the period that saw the production of Wordsworth and Coleridge's volume, Southey reminisced: 'I never before or since produced so much poetry in the same space of time'.¹ I offer *Poems 1799* as a volume that can be read as an ambiguous 'answer' to *Lyrical Ballads*, complicated by Southey's conflicted political sympathies. An emerging conservatism characterised this period for Southey, but I suggest that the poems he wrote during the closing years of the eighteenth century reveal that the treatment of popular magic in *Lyrical Ballads* stirred a residual radicalism in a poet who continued to hope for social reform – a conflict that would reemerge in his 1801 epic, *Thalaba the Destroyer*.

Marilyn Butler's seminal 1989 unveiling of Southey as an important participant of the intertextual 'conversations' of Romantic poetry sparked a renewed interest in the poet.² As Lynda Pratt suggests,

¹ Robert Southey, *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey, Collected by Himself*, 10 vols (London, 1837–8), IV (1838), p. ix.

² Marilyn Butler, 'Repossessing the Past: The Case for an Open Literary History', *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, ed. Marjorie Levinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 64–84.

As the marked rise in the number of articles published on his writings illustrates, Southey is undoubtedly one of the authors to benefit most from ongoing reappraisals of romantic period writing.³

Southey's oriental epics *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), and his 'occidental' poem *Madoc* (1805) have been 'revealed as important instances of the ambivalence and tension inherent in Romantic discourses of colonialism'.⁴ However, to date Southey's shorter poems have enjoyed less critical attention. 'Undoubtedly', Pratt argues, 'the lack of readily available editions has been a contributory factor in their continued neglect'.⁵ Since Butler's influential article 'Repossessing the Past: the Case for an Open Literary History' was published in 1989, however, Romantic scholars such as Nigel Leask, Nicholas Roe, Tim Fulford, Carol Bolton and Lynda Pratt have worked to challenge the orthodox dismissal of Southey as merely a footnote of the Romantic literary canon – a major textual, historicist and literary critical project that has seen the publication of special journal editions of both *Romanticism* and *Wordsworth Circle* in 2011.⁶ This chapter seeks to contribute to the reinstatement of Southey at the very heart of Romanticism's poetic dialogues.

³ Lynda Pratt, 'Introduction', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), vol. V, p. xxxv.

⁴ Pratt, 'Introduction', p. xxxv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

⁶ See *Romanticism*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (April 2011) and *The Wordsworth Circle: Robert Southey in Context*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter 2011).

‘We were Altogether Displeased’: Southey’s Response to *Lyrical Ballads*

In order to calibrate Southey’s creative response to *Lyrical Ballads* it is necessary to consider the contours of his turbulent relationship with Coleridge and Wordsworth, which played a major role in his personal reaction to the volume and framed Southey’s political responses – attuned as they were to the political and social issues of the 1790s – in crucial ways. Having met in Oxford in June 1794, Coleridge and Southey quickly struck up a friendship based on shared ‘personal and financial anxieties, doubts about their role in life, a passion for literature, and, above all, an eager, optimistic republicanism’.⁷ Immediately, the two men began dreaming of the construction of a new republican society, stripped of political oppression. Pantisocracy, they hoped, would be established in America, on the banks of the Susquehanna River. As the 1794 treason trials began, an increasing reputation for radicalism galvanised Southey’s determination to leave Britain. As Nigel Leask suggests, both Coleridge and Southey, like their fellow political and religious dissenters, ‘found themselves in an ideological cul-de-sac from which emigration seemed to be the most plausible escape’.⁸

However, despite initial enthusiasm, cracks soon began to appear in the Pantisocratic plans, and these were mirrored by fractures in the relationship between the two poets. Coleridge was beginning to tire of Southey’s unrelenting sense of moral righteousness. Likewise, Southey grew weary of his unpredictable partner, who was by now in the throes of the early stages of opium addiction.⁹ Southey’s suggestion that

⁷ Storey, *Robert Southey: A Life*, p. 48.

⁸ Nigel Leask, ‘Pantisocracy and the politics of the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*’, *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism*, ed. Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest (1993), pp. 39–58, p. 40.

⁹ ‘Coleridge had failed to turn up to deliver one of his lectures [from their 1795 ‘Course of Historical Lectures . . . (Unconnected with the Politics of the Day)’], one on the Roman Empire which he had

he should bring Shadrach Weeks (a servant of Southey's aunt, Elizabeth Tyler, and his childhood friend) to America as a servant rather than an equal, and his revelation to George Burnett that he planned to maintain his private resources and individual property was met with disapproval by Coleridge, who considered these moves to be a flagrant departure from the principles of the scheme. Clearly, the breakdown of their Pantisocratic plans was a major source of turbulence in the relationship between the two poets from 1795. In the meantime, during the summer of that year, both Coleridge and Southey were introduced to Wordsworth. While Coleridge immediately secured a firm friendship with Wordsworth, the relationship between Wordsworth and Southey failed to ignite until much later in their lives, during their residence in the Lake District.

The rift between Coleridge and Southey was confirmed by Southey's choosing to follow his uncle, Herbert Hill, to Portugal. On his return to England in May 1796, Southey had attempted a reconciliation with his former friend. However, the reparation of their relationship was fragile. On 31 December 1796, Coleridge confided in John Thelwall:

Between ourselves the enthusiasm of friendship is not with S. and me. We quarrelled and the quarrel lasted for a twelvemonth. We are now reconciled; but the cause of the difference was solemn, and 'the blasted oak puts not forth

claimed he was particularly anxious to give. Southey had nobly, but resentfully, stepped in at the last moment. The tensions between the two had never really settled, and when it became clear that Coleridge was succumbing to the waywardness and 'indolence' of the opium-addict, Southey was not amused' — Storey, *Southey: A life*, p. 76.

its buds anew.' We are acquaintances, and feel kindliness to-wards each other, but I do not esteem or love Southey.¹⁰

While the relationship between Southey and Coleridge had dramatically cooled, Coleridge's friendship with Wordsworth had blossomed, and they spent the fabled *annus mirabilis* composing *Lyrical Ballads*. As this biographical information suggests, Southey read *Lyrical Ballads* at an equivocal and pressured point in his relationship with its authors. In May 1798, Joseph Cottle received the manuscript of the volume. The exact date it was sent to Southey is not clear, but Cottle must have shown him a copy before the end of June because the issue of *The Morning Post* published on 30 June 1798 contained Southey's poem 'The Idiot', based closely on Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy'. On 5 September 1798, over a month before the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, Southey made his first recorded comments about the volume in a letter to William Taylor:

Have you seen a volume of *Lyrical Ballads*? They are by Coleridge and Wordsworth but their names are not affixed. Coleridge's ballad of the Auncient Marinere [*sic*] is I think the clumsiest attempt at German sublimity I ever saw. Many of the others are fine, and some I shall re-read, upon the same principle that led me thro Trissino, whenever I am afraid of writing like a child or an old woman.¹¹

¹⁰ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 293–5, p. 294.

¹¹ 'Robert Southey to William Taylor, 5 September 1798', *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey Part Two 1798–1803*, ed. Lynda Pratt and Ian Packer (2011),

Less than a fortnight later, Southey wrote to George Dyer asking 'Have you seen a volume of *Lyrical Ballads*? No author's name – but by Coleridge and Wordsworth'.¹²

He also sent a letter to John May on 26 September 1798, informing him that

Coleridge and Wordsworth have published an anonymous volume of poems under the title of *Lyrical Ballads*. They are of very unequal merit.¹³

It is reasonable to believe that Southey did not realise that *Lyrical Ballads* was not yet available to the public during these months, based on his questions to Taylor and Dyer. The volume was finally published in October 1798, after Coleridge's and Wordsworth's departure for Germany. In their absence, Southey wrote his now infamous review of *Lyrical Ballads* that appeared in *The Critical Review* for 24 October 1798; an important precursor to Southey's complex personal, political and poetical responses to the volume in *Poems 1799*.

Southey's unsigned review of *Lyrical Ballads* registers his ambiguous response to the volume. The review is written to suggest that Southey did not know the identity of the author(s); however, as his correspondence with Taylor, Dyer and May prove, he was fully aware that Wordsworth and Coleridge were the anonymous poets. The contemporary critical reception the 1798 volume received was generally favourable.

As Speck notes,

<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_letters/Part_Two/HTML/letterEEd.26.347.html> [accessed 12 May 2013]. Hereafter, *Southey Letters*.

¹² *Southey Letters*, 348.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 349.

[Southey's] review went against the grain of others that appeared at the time, and is obviously almost completely at odds with the critical reputation that *Lyrical Ballads* has enjoyed ever since.¹⁴

The fragile relationship between Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge at the time, suggests that the review might have been a direct attack on Coleridge and the new literary and social partnership he had cultivated. *Poems 1799* certainly reflects the personal and political disagreements that had surfaced over the years leading up to its publication. However, as Mary Jacobus suggests, Southey also had genuine ideological concerns about the volume. These concerns and criticisms would provide a frame for his own poetic reactions in *Poems 1799*.¹⁵

The central concern that Southey addresses in his review is the suitability of the ballad's subjects for the purposes of such a radical poetic experiment:

The 'experiment' we think, has failed, not because the language of conversation is little adapted for 'the purposes of poetic pleasure', but because it has been tried upon uninteresting subjects.¹⁶

Amongst the poems targeted directly are Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. Southey regards the superstitious old sea captain's narration in 'The

¹⁴ Speck, *Entire Man of Letters*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Mary Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads*', *The Review of English Studies*, 22.85 (1971), pp. 20–36, p. 35.

¹⁶ Robert Southey, 'Unsigned Review', *The Critical Review*, 24 (October 1798), p. 204.

Thorn' as 'loquacious', suggesting that 'the author should have recollected that he who personates loquacity becomes tiresome himself'.¹⁷ The tale of an old woman who curses her socially affluent tormentor with a freezing punishment in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is, Southey suggests, 'perhaps a good story for a ballad, because it is a well known tale'.¹⁸ However, it was the subtitle's claim that Wordsworth's ballad was a 'true story' that was of greatest concern to Southey:

Is the author certain that it is 'well-authenticated'? and does not such an assertion promote the popular superstition of witchcraft?¹⁹

Similarly, in his reading of Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner', Southey called the poem's status as an *authentic* attempt to mimic the styles of the old English masters into question. He could discover 'no resemblance whatever' to the early English poets whom (according to the *Lyrical Ballads*' 'Advertisement') the ballad imitated, 'except in antiquated spelling and a few obsolete words'.²⁰ Southey also argued that the 'laboriously beautiful', yet 'unintelligible', poem was too morally evasive. He challenged his readers to 'exercise their ingenuity' by attempting to 'unriddle' passages of the ballad, exclaiming that 'we do not sufficiently understand the story to analyse it'.²¹ The suggestion here is that Southey's criticism of 'The Ancient Mariner' chiefly focused on its failure to deliver a clear, didactic moral message.

¹⁷ Southey, 'Unsigned Review', p. 204.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

It is my contention that the textual and political ambiguities of Wordsworth and Coleridge's poems that Southey had criticised in his review of *Lyrical Ballads* were a site of political and personal anxiety for Southey. Desperate to suppress these anxieties he recast Wordsworth's and Coleridge's ballads in *Poems 1799*. The argument that Southey took elements of *Lyrical Ballads* and adapted them in his own poetry is by no means a new one. In 1971, Mary Jacobus explored Southey's *Poems 1799*, and the poetry he produced for the *Morning Post*, as corrective rewritings of Wordsworth and Coleridge's ballads. She reveals the extent of Southey's 'borrowings', and the wider revisionary process of which they were a part:

In some cases, poems from *Lyrical Ballads* are returned firmly to the level of magazine poetry from which they had been raised, stripped of their thematic depth and narrative sophistication. In other cases, what is idiosyncratic or disturbing in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge is replaced by topical or humanitarian interest of a quite straightforward kind: the poems become not simply shallower, but more public.²²

Jacobus's article also suggests that some of Wordsworth's poems, such as 'The Idiot Boy' and 'The Thorn', were trivialised, not just rendered simpler or more 'public'. She argues that Southey's 'The Mad Mother' (written early-mid June 1799) 'pares "The Thorn" down to its bare essentials, replacing its circuitous presentation with a straightforward story of infanticide'.²³ Southey, Jacobus argues, evacuates

²² Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 24.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

Wordsworth's poetry of psychological depth and emotional nuance – an argument that emerging scholarship has recognised to be an oversimplification of Southey's negotiation of the volume.

In 1998, Christopher Smith extended Jacobus's argument, suggesting that Southey's idea of the 'interesting subjects' that were missing from *Lyrical Ballads* were 'hinged primarily around outrage, horror and death, a kind of poetical extremis, which usually draws attention by shock'.²⁴ For Smith, Wordsworth's negotiation of complex human emotion was replaced by Southey's straightforward sensationalism. Both Jacobus and Smith suggest that Southey's criticism of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' as a poem that encourages the 'popular superstition of witchcraft' constitutes a paradox that borders on hypocrisy in the light of the supernatural themes and tales of popular superstition he exploits in his own poetry. Jacobus argues that 'such cavilling comes oddly from a supernatural ballad writer like Southey',²⁵ and Smith adds: 'presumably Southey thought that the Supernatural was admissible as long as it appeared to have a reliable source and narrative coherence understandable to the reader'.²⁶ This underplays the nuances of Southey's responses to *Lyrical Ballads*, however. Far from completely stripping all ambiguity from Wordsworth's ballads in his own poetry, many of the pieces in Southey's *Poems 1799* are multifaceted and politically evasive. His response to Wordsworth and Coleridge's volume is far more complex than Jacobus's and Smith's readings allow.

²⁴ Christopher Smith, 'Robert Southey and the Emergence of Lyrical Ballads', *Romanticism on the Net*, 9 (1998), <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1998/v/n9/005792ar.html>> [accessed 15 May 2013] (para. 6 of 39).

²⁵ Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 27.

²⁶ Smith, 'Robert Southey and the Emergence of Lyrical Ballads' (para. 17 of 39).

In response to outmoded critical engagements that regard his importance only in relation to Wordsworth and Coleridge, modern scholarship has worked to calibrate Southey's achievement as a poet in his own right. While my own investigation chooses to read Southey's poetry – particularly his ballads – in alignment with *Lyrical Ballads*, this by no means suggests that Southey was merely emulating the work of his contemporaries. Certainly, Southey was regarded as the most prolific of the three poets by contemporary audiences, and Coleridge in particular took inspiration from the already experienced ballad-maker when composing his contributions to the 1798 volume. As Marilyn Butler has argued,

From 1797, for example, in what we have chosen to call Wordsworth's Great Decade, [Wordsworth] mostly figured in the public mind as a follower of Southey. It was Southey, with two collections of ballads in 1797 and 1799, who was already celebrated for this form of literary slumming. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* could never in his lifetime be sufficiently dissociated from Southey's²⁷

Recent criticism in this field (by Lynda Pratt, Daniel White and Nicola Trott, among others), has worked to expand scholarly investigations beyond the influences of Wordsworth and Coleridge in order to contextualise Southey's poetry in the nexus of radical coterie of which he was a part, particularly during the Bristol years. Stuart Curran, Daniel White and Ashley Cross, for instance, have investigated the impact of Southey's correspondence with poet and *Morning Post* columnist Mary Robinson in

²⁷ Marilyn Butler, 'Plotting the Revolution: The Political Narratives of Romantic Poetry and Criticism', *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory*, ed. Kenneth R Johnson, Gilbert Chaitin, Karen Hanson and Herbert Marks (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 141.

what Stuart Curran has described as Joseph Cottle's 'new school of poetry'.²⁸ While my exploration of Southey's ballads does return to what might be considered a more traditional pairing of Southey alongside the canonical works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, I offer a reading of Southey in his role not as emulator, but as critical commentator on *Lyrical Ballads*. His creative responses were published as remedial rejoinders, a series of pointed attacks on aspects of the collection that he felt to be socially irresponsible.²⁹

In my previous chapters, I have revealed the living culture of popular magic negotiated in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as a vehicle of social empowerment and reform. In order to gauge his response to the volume, it is necessary to assess just how 'canny' a reader Southey was. One might argue that Southey's criticism of the volume is the product of misreading – a lack of critical sensitivity to the nuances that this thesis has sought to reveal. However, I contend that Southey was fully aware of these nuances. I suggest that his reaction to popular magic as an agent of social reform, as deployed by Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*, bespeaks a fascinatingly conflicted response that is related to his complex political sympathies during the final years of the 1790s. Further, I argue that the treatment of practitioners of the material occult in *Lyrical Ballads* awakened a lingering radicalism that appealed to Southey's reformist

²⁸ See Stuart Curran, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context', *Revisioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837*, ed. Carol Shiner-Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Daniel Robinson, 'The Poets "Perplexed": Southey and Robinson at Work on the "Morning Post"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 42. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 5-9; Ashley Cross, 'Robert Southey and Mary Robinson in Dialogue', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 42. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 10-17.

²⁹ See, for example, Lynda Pratt, 'Introduction: Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism', *Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism*, ed. Lynda Pratt (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), pp. xvii-xxviii; Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nicola Trott, 'Poemets and Poemlings: Robert Southey's Minority Interest', *Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism*, ed. Lynda Pratt (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 69-86.

hopes. However, doubts emerged for Southey about whether this was a suitable mode of socially reformatory power – doubts that are articulated, I suggest, in his association of popular magic with social *disenfranchisement*. Troubled by Wordsworth's reliance on the supposedly enfranchising properties of material occult practice, Southey's ironic rewritings of *Lyrical Ballads* pushed Wordsworth's poems to an extreme, exposing the social issues and aftermaths (as Southey saw them) that Wordsworth *had failed to negotiate*. Southey saw Wordsworth's occult practitioners as being further entrenched in a cycle of hierarchical dependence and social marginalisation. Southey's *Poems 1799* was not merely an attempt to remedy the poetical or stylistic problems of *Lyrical Ballads*; it was an effort to address and inflect its perceived efficacy as political intervention, and as an enabler of social change.

Problematising 'The Witch'

Southey's 'English Eclogues' are perhaps the most easily recognizable ventriloquisations of Wordsworth's poetic style. In the short preface to these six pastoral poems, Southey claimed that they 'bear no resemblance to any poems in our language'³⁰ – a claim that offers a challenge to the idiosyncratic 'experiment' of *Lyrical Ballads*. However, Southey's bucolics mimic the 'colloquial plainness of language'³¹ that Wordsworth had deployed, and were written with a view to stay 'true to nature'.

Among the eclogues, and indeed, in the context of *Poems 1799* as a whole, 'The Witch' appears to be the most direct engagement with, and comment on, the modalities of the occult present in *Lyrical Ballads*. Southey's poem relates the efforts

³⁰ Southey, 'English Eclogues: Preface', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, p. 307.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Nathaniel and his superstitious father employ to protect themselves from Old Margery, an old woman suspected of witchcraft. They nail a horseshoe to their threshold, believing it has the power to unhex their home. The village curate speaks on behalf of the old woman, arguing that she is merely poverty-stricken. Nathaniel's father eventually agrees to send her a little charity when he discovers she is dying, but encourages his son to continue deploying the protective charm in case Old Margery recovers. Southey's poem adopts the hedge-picking motif from 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', and also borrows Goody Blake's supposed powers:

I did but threaten her because she robb'd
Our hedge, and the next night there came a wind
That made me shake to hear it in my bed!
How came it that the storm unroofed my barn,
And only mine in the parish?³²

However, where Goody Blake's adoption of an occult identity in Wordsworth's ballad is the source of a certain social power, Old Margery remains powerless and voiceless. Rendered a pariah in the superstitious community, she becomes little more than a popular scapegoat for others' misfortunes.

'The Witch', I suggest, emerges from Southey's concerns that popular magic as deployed by Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* is not a suitable vehicle for lasting social reform. Southey believed that the moral and social message of 'Goody Blake and

³² Southey, 'The Witch', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, pp. 321–326, ll. 44–8.

Harry Gill' would have little impact on his readers. He inscribes this concern in the various paradoxical issues and circularities of his poem. Stories of Margery's curses are spread by the parish gossip-mongers (Nathaniel and his father are prime agents). Branded a pariah, the old woman is banished to the very margins of society, and her suffering is ignored as those who are in a position to offer charity refuse their social responsibilities:

CURATE:

Shame farmer!

Is that the charity your bible teaches?

FATHER:

My bible does not teach me to love witches.

I know what's charity; who pays his tithes

And poor-rates readier?

(*'The Witch'*, ll. 91–5)

However, Nathaniel and his father are themselves clearly invested in the very practices for which Margery is demonised. Charms such as the horseshoe nailed to their threshold and the pebble hung in their stable were popularly used by cunning folk to unbewitch customers who supposed themselves to be under the influence of a maleficent curse. Southey does not differentiate between 'good' and 'evil' magic. The deployment of popular magic is merely a means of disguising – indeed, enabling – the true target of the poem: the enforcement of power by those already in control. The

curate assures Nathaniel's father that 'All the parish / Look up to you' ('The Witch', ll. 99–100). His position as a respected, wealthy and powerful member of the community is bolstered by the charity he bestows on his supposed tormentor. Old Margery's status as dependant is bound up in, as she is subjugated by, his patriarchal kindness. Magic in 'The Witch' is therefore representative of a cycle of hegemonic control from which a figure like Old Margery cannot hope to break free.

The role of the curate is also problematic. He seems to be a reasoned voice, as he pleads Old Margery's innocence:

Poor wretch! half blind
And crooked with her years, without a child
Or friend in her old age, 'Tis hard indeed
To have her very miseries made her crimes!

('The Witch', ll. 78–81)

However, careful reading unveils yet another stratum of social power. Charity is controlled by a despotic system of tithes and poor-rates. Southey's decision to trade the ballad form of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' for what is effectively the dramatic mode of a play in 'The Witch', emphasises the vocalities of power. While we as readers are allowed direct access to the speech of Nathaniel, his father and the curate, free from any mediating narrator, the words of Old Margery are merely ventriloquized by the curate – a figure who in the economy of the poem represents a latent conservatism, and whose powers of vocalisation ensure his social dominance. The curate manipulates the superstition of Nathaniel's father to encourage him to act

generously by continuing the illusion, and suggesting that Old Margery has the power to bless, as well as curse:

You might send her
Some little matter, something comfortable,
That she may go down easier to the grave
And bless you when she dies.

(‘The Witch’, ll. 112–5)

A thoroughly internalised belief in the occult is again proven to maintain a certain hierarchy. Instead of being enlightened, the superstitious beliefs of Nathaniel and his father are simply reaffirmed, and no lasting social change results. The final lines of the poem confirm that the father’s benevolence is fleeting:

NATHANIEL:

And so old Margery’s dying!

FATHER:

But you know
She may recover; so drive t’other nail in!

(‘The Witch’, ll. 123–4)

There is a certain brutality, and irony, to the suggestion of a rhyme here (‘dying – nail in’). In ‘The Witch’, Southey can be seen to take issue with Wordsworth’s deployment

of the material occult in *Lyrical Ballads* as an agent of social power, since the role of the 'witch' is evacuated of all energy. Occult identities are revealed as dead ends for disenfranchised women who are configured as 'vermin' and who, as the curate reveals, are

forced to crawl abroad

And pick the hedges, just to keep herself

From perishing with cold, because no neighbour

Had pity on her age.

(*'The Witch'*, ll. 85–8)

Indeed, one might go further and see the Wordsworth of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' effectively written into 'The Witch' *in the role of the curate*. The implication is that, by encouraging other farmers (and thus the reader) to think of Goody Blake and Harry Gill in the hope that they would be inspired to give charitably themselves, Wordsworth at the end of his ballad imposes a system of control that is in fact *underpinned* by the superstitious gossip of the village and by the threat of occult retribution.³³ 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', Southey claimed, could not provide an adequate model for social reform because the occult was too deeply implicated within prevailing systems of despotic control. Old Margery represents what Goody Blake would eventually become.

³³ As profiled in Chapter 1, some individuals continued to encourage fear of supernatural revenge after the refusal of charity. See Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p.177.

By presenting Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as latently conservative, Southey emphasised his own radical principles. However, *Poems 1799* also allowed a curious Southey the opportunity to indulge a fantasy of conservative orthodoxy in the wake of radical disappointment that he found increasingly attractive as the 1790s drew to a close. *Poems 1799* is a stage of struggle as far as Southey's political identity is concerned. Enacted in his revocalisations of *Lyrical Ballads*, I suggest, are Southey's anxieties regarding his deepening conservatism. The argument with Wordsworth is a way in which he could configure the poet of *Lyrical Ballads* as a more conservative thinker in the very act of creating poems such as 'The Witch' whose manifest content is easily read as reactionary. These poems are symptomatic of a politically and personally conflicted poet at the close of the decade.

Imposed Occult Identities: 'The Cross-Roads' and 'The Mad Woman'

Owing to the themes of infanticide and maternal mourning that they share, Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' has traditionally been paired with 'The Mad Woman', the ballad Southey published in the *Morning Post* on 11 June 1799.³⁴ However, I suggest that 'The Thorn' and 'The Mad Woman' (along with Wordsworth's 'The Mad Mother' – a poem that also shares many textual parallels with Southey's 'The Mad Woman') can be valuably read alongside Southey's 'The Cross-Roads' as part of a triad of poems that deal with issues of empowerment and occult space. To date, no scholars have identified 'The Thorn' as a prompt for Southey's 'The Cross-Roads'. However, there are noticeable similarities between the two ballads. In both poems a woman is

³⁴ See Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 21, and Smith, 'Robert Southey and the Emergence of *Lyrical Ballads*' (para. 8 of 39).

accused of committing an unnatural crime (infanticide/suicide), and in both the fallen woman is ascribed as a possible occult practitioner.

In 'The Cross-Roads', the story of a poor parish girl who committed suicide and was buried at a cross-road is related to a traveller by an old man as they recline against a post that marks the burial site. The young village girl, who had escaped from a life of hard service, is taken in by a cruel farmer and his mother. Following six months of untold misery, the girl is found hanging in a secluded out-house. Her supposed suicide is punished by exclusion from consecrated ground, and she is buried at the point where two roads meet:

There's a poor girl lies buried here
Beneath this very place.
The earth upon her corpse is prest
This stake is driven into her breast
And a stone is on her face.³⁵

As is well known, crossroads were common burial sites for outlaws and those who were guilty of taking their own lives. What is less well known is the fact that ritualistic practices of the most extreme kind began to be expunged from the statute books only during the second decade of the nineteenth century

³⁵ Robert Southey, 'The Cross Roads' *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, pp. 284–288, ll. 41–45.

Until 1823, English law required that suicides be buried in the highway; crossroads were generally chosen, and the corpse was often staked – a ritual of public disgrace, to deter others. According to local stories, some witches were similarly treated . . . Those [crossroads] chosen were usually outside the town boundaries, probably symbolising expulsion of the wrongdoer.³⁶

‘Until 1823’: it is a salutary reminder of the currency of the disciplinary-occult practices that Romantic-period authors would have recognised as part of their landscape and psychic hinterland. Crossroads were popularly believed to be meeting sites for witches. The practice of driving a stake through the heart and burying the corpse either face-down, or with stones placed on the face, was traditionally used to prevent those in league with evil spirits from escaping the grave. Smith suggests that ‘The Cross-Roads’ ‘is one extra dig at the superstitious notions of witchcraft found particularly in village life’.³⁷ Like other poems in Southey’s volume, ‘The Cross-Roads’ contains no *explicit* references to a living, material occult culture. However, the style of burial to which the girl is subjected identifies her as a possible witch. Like Martha Ray in Wordsworth’s ‘The Thorn’, she becomes the subject of village gossip and is (in this case, physically) excluded from society – a proscription enacted by her burial outside the village churchyard. The cross-roads become an occult – or cursed – space, much like the territory Wordsworth’s Martha Ray claims as her own in ‘The Thorn’, which is marked by the twisted thorn and the mysterious mound of earth.

Wordsworth’s Martha Ray is able to carve out a private space for herself using the

³⁶ Jacqueline Simpson and Stephen Round, *A Dictionary of English Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 62-3.

³⁷ Smith, ‘Robert Southey and the Emergence of *Lyrical Ballads*’ (para. 19 of 39).

powers that an enforced occult identity has given her, as I have argued in a previous chapter. In Southey's rendering, however, the parish girl is rendered wholly powerless. The identity of witch is *imposed* (violently) upon Southey's victim – not embraced; moreover, the post at the cross-roads becomes a chilling reminder of the consequences of challenging established systems of power.

Despite being labelled as a cursed space, however, the grave at the cross-roads is demystified, or at least degothicised, by Southey's elderly storyteller:

I have past by about that hour
When men are not most brave,
It did not make my heart to fail,
And I have heard the nightingale
Sing sweetly on her grave.

I have past by about that hour
When ghosts their freedom have,
But there was nothing here to fright,
And I have seen the glow worm's light
Shine on the poor girl's grave.

(‘The Cross-Roads’, ll. 56–65)

The glow worm that lingers over the grave at the crossroads arguably serves as a reminder of Wordsworth's 1793 poem *An Evening Walk*, a poem that challenges its reader to look past the bucolic Lake District setting and recognise the image of human

suffering, portrayed by the female beggar who struggles to keep her children from feeling the pains of poverty:

Fair swan! by all a mother's joys caressed,
Haply some wretch has eyed, and called thee blessed;
When with her infants, from some shady seat
By the lake's edge, she rose – to face the noontide heat,
Or taught their limbs along the dusty road
A few short steps to totter with their load . . .
Oft she has taught them in her lap to lay
The shining glow-worm; or, in heedless play,
Toss it from hand to hand, disquieted;
While others, not unseen, are free to shed
Green unmolested light upon their mossy bed . . .
Press the sad kiss, fond mother! Vainly fears
Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears;
No tears can chill them, and no bosom warms,
Thy breast their death-bed, confined in thine arms!³⁸

It could be argued that Southey referenced the wretched mother of *An Evening Walk* as a reminder to Wordsworth (and his readers) of the dangers of social marginalisation. Wordsworth's vision of the rural occult as a socially *reformative*

³⁸ William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, ed. James H Averill (London: Cornell University Press, 1984), ll. 251–287.

power was, for Southey, merely another pastoral idealisation. Magical identities in 'The Cross-Roads' manifest as a result of despotic control and social manipulation. The old man tells his travelling companion that the grave is not the site of which one should be wary. In a radical swerve, Southey reveals that the site of the old man's superstitious fears lies within holy ground:

There's one who like a Christian lies
Beneath the church-tree's shade;
I'd rather go a long mile round
Than pass at evening thro' the ground
Wherein that man is laid.

There's one that in the church-yard lies
For whom the bell did toll;
He lies in consecrated ground,
But for all the wealth in Bristol town
I would not be with his soul!

(‘The Cross-Roads’, ll. 66–75)

The assumption here is that the farmer was responsible for the young girl's death. However, he is neither accused of, nor punished for, the crime. The farmer is buried within the confines of the churchyard. The tolling bells suggest a certain superstitious privilege extended only to the wealthy; an image that can be traced to 'The Knell', a poem written by Southey and sent in a letter to Robert Lovell in April 1794:

In days of yore, when Superstitions sway
Bound blinded Europe in her sacred spell.
The wizard priest enjoined the parting knell
To fright the hovering devil from his prey.³⁹

A note appended to 'The Knell' records the inspiration for the poem: 'The parting knell was instituted in the darker ages of superstition, from the idea that the sound terrified the Devil from his prey'.⁴⁰ This service came at a price, and only those who could afford to pay had the comfort of knowing that their souls were protected – a custom that assured and strengthened the social hierarchy. The poem also usefully contextualises Southey's radical sympathies. In 'The Knell', written at the height of Southey's radical enthusiasm, the demonised King requires every bell in the land to ward off the Devil:

But when Deaths levelling hand lays low the King
(Since Kings in both worlds very well are known)
Thro all his kingdoms every bell must ring
For Satan comes with legions for his own.⁴¹

The tolling of the bell in 'The Cross-Roads' (and also in 'A Ballad, shewing how an Old Woman rode double, and who rode before her') allows the reader a glimpse of the

³⁹ *Southey Letters*, 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

radical Southey who wrote 'The Knell', awakened by his interactions with the material occult deployed in *Lyrical Ballads*. The young girl's imposed status as both possible witch and social pariah ensures that social injustice is neglected. Again, as I have argued, Wordsworth's Martha Ray can actually be seen to be empowered by an act of ventriloquisation as the gossips of the village repeat her haunting reverie 'oh misery, oh misery'. In 'The Cross-Roads' however, the social status of the young girl's tormentor ensures that any claim trumpeting her innocence remains no more than a rumour.

Issues of space (who controls it, and who occupies it) are also brought to the fore in the third poem in this triad, 'The Mad Woman'.⁴² Jacobus suggests that 'The Mad Woman' is a re-telling of 'The Thorn', stripped of the psychological depth of Wordsworth's poem:

The chief difference between 'The Thorn' and 'The Mad Woman' is the loss of intensity involved in Southey's much more explicit treatment of the infanticide. Where Wordsworth hints, Southey states, and the drama of the initial confrontation between traveller and mad woman is not sustained.⁴³

Both women haunt the (supposed) graves of their children, and call out their chilling reveries. However, I suggest that while Wordsworth's Martha Ray in some measure benefits from the occult identity imposed on her by the village gossips by claiming the

⁴² When it was originally published in the *Morning Post* on 11 June 1799, 'The Mad Woman' was entitled 'The circumstance on which the following ballad is founded, happened not so many years ago in Bristol'. In his *Annual Anthology* (1800), Southey renamed the ballad 'The Mad Woman'.

⁴³ Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads*', p. 26.

spot on the side of the mountain as her own private territory, Southey's Martha is not afforded the same opportunity. Her haunting cry permeates the gossip of the local village, repeated by people like the narrator and the inn-keeper as they spread her harrowing tale. She threatens to 'curse' anyone who mocks her, and the innkeeper's assertion that 'strange her punishment hath been' renders her a possible occult practitioner. In 'The Mad Woman', the spot that Southey's Martha occupies is not a private space within nature, but rather a church yard, identified in 'The Cross-Roads' as a site of religious and social hierarchical power (and abuse). Her spell-like moans become desperate appeals to a community unwilling to acknowledge their own responsibilities in forcing her to commit infanticide, driven by shame:

Would I could feel the winter wind,
Would I could feel the snow!
I have fire in my head, poor Martha cried,
I have fire in my heart also.⁴⁴

The plight of Southey's Martha, left to suffer in the freezing conditions, represents Southey's reading of Wordsworth's occult in *The Thorn*: Martha Ray, he believes, does *not* achieve privacy and empowerment – she is forcibly excluded from a village community that has pushed her (in the case of 'The Thorn', physically) to the very margins of society. Once again, Southey's agenda is to reveal the social problems seemingly buried or glossed over by Wordsworth's investment in popular magic as an

⁴⁴ Robert Southey, 'The Circumstance on which the following ballad is founded, happened not many years ago in Bristol', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, pp. 350–2, ll. 65–8.

enfranchising power. Although the infidelity of the 'unthinking' Stephen Hill is mentioned in Wordsworth's poem, Martha Ray's adoption of a new, empowering magical identity means that the crime of infanticide (if, indeed, it was ever committed) goes uninvestigated; and in turn the abandonment suffered by the young mother at the hands of both her lover and a society that would render her a pariah is never brought to light. In a move calculated to confront Wordsworth head-on, Southey's ironic re-telling does away with the ambiguity surrounding the infanticide, alerting the reader to those social crimes that forced the young mother to act out of necessity – fearful of the social pressures and social stigma that faced her as an unmarried mother and a fallen woman. Martha Ray's empowerment following the adoption of an occult image may, in Wordsworth's mind, benefit her as an individual. However, Southey's contention is that Martha Ray's *enforced* status as witch is not a basis for lasting, widespread, systematic social reform, which can be achieved only once society's inequities of means and opportunity have been levelled.

'The Ballad of a Ballad-Maker': Southey's Remedial Rewritings of 'The Ancient Mariner'

No longer agents of social enfranchisement, Southey's manifestations of popular magic had their roots in outdated witchcraft and unenlightened superstition. As I have suggested in Chapter 4, however, *Lyrical Ballads* as a volume was problematically divided against itself as Coleridge struggled to align himself with Wordsworth's investment in popular magic – a division that was particularly visible in the opening poem of the 1798 edition, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. In his correspondence of mid-1798, and his review of *Lyrical Ballads*, Southey clearly registered his disappointment with 'The Ancient Mariner'. Coleridge's 'Dutch attempt at German

sublimity' was, in Southey's opinion, inauthentic; it was inappropriately grounded in the tradition it was meant to emulate, tried upon a subject of too little importance, and far too morally evasive. Even the most ingenious of Coleridge's readers, Southey intimates, would be at a loss to extract a didactic message from the 'absurd' and 'unintelligible' poem. What one may hear here is Southey's inability to view 'The Ancient Mariner' as a work that might effectively contribute to the social reform that Southey hoped for: 'we do not sufficiently understand the story to analyze it'.⁴⁵

In January 1797, Charles Lamb had commented to Coleridge that 'Southey certainly had no pretensions to vie with you in the sublime of poetry but he tells a plain tale better than you'.⁴⁶ Southey's 'The Sailor, who had served in the Slave Trade' recasts the themes of guilt and remorse in 'The Ancient Mariner', but with the supernatural elements of the ballad completely evacuated. Coleridge's arcane sources are replaced with a contemporary and authentically explicit account of a current social issue – the cruelty of the slave trade. Southey's tale of a sailor who was forced to beat a negro woman on board a slave-ship deals with the same theme of haunting personal (and social) guilt that characterises Coleridge's ballad (which historicist criticism has also persuasively revealed to be a poem attuned to the horrors of the slave-trade). 'The Sailor' was prefaced by a short note:

In September, 1798, a Dissenting Minister of Bristol, discovered a sailor in the neighbourhood of that City, groaning and praying in a hovel. The circumstance that occasioned his agony of mind is detailed in the annexed Ballad, without

⁴⁵ Southey, 'Unsigned Review', p. 204.

⁴⁶ Charles Lamb, 'To S. T. Coleridge, 5 January 1797', *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, ed. Alfred Ainger (London: Macmillain & co., 1888), p. 58.

the slightest addition or alteration. By presenting it as a Poem the story is made more public, and such stories ought to be made as public as possible.⁴⁷

Alan Richardson's 1998 essay 'Darkness Visible: Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry' suggests that 'Southey's ballad clearly asks to be read as a gloss on Coleridge's recently composed "Ancient Mariner"'.⁴⁸ 'Once having read the ballads – one a defining text of canonical British Romanticism and the other a "topical" or "ephemeral" work by a now "minor" poet – in tandem', Richardson claims,

it becomes difficult, thereafter, as several commentators have attested, to detach the effect of psychological guilt and horror described to such seemingly universal effect in Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' from the material, economic, and political context made overt by Southey's companion piece.⁴⁹

However, Richardson's argument remains reliant on a view of Southey as a 'minor' poet – a contextualising agent. Carol Bolton's *Writing the Empire* (2007) contests that this is a historically unrealistic portrayal of the poets' relations to each other. 'By reconsidering Southey's important contribution to Romantic period poetry', she argues, 'it is possible to see that all three writers [Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge] inhabit an equal (if disputatious) place in their rural, radical milieu'. My

⁴⁷ Robert Southey, 'The Sailor, who had served in the Slave Trade', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London, Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, pp. 288–92, p. 289.

⁴⁸ Alan Richardson, 'Darkness Visible? Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry', *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire 1780–1830*, ed. Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 129–47, p. 145.

⁴⁹ Richardson, 'Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry', p. 145.

reading of Southey's 'The Sailor' aligns with Bolton's suggestion that the poem 'should not be read as a 'gloss' or as a 'companion piece' for the 'Ancient Marinere', but more robustly as Southey's *rewriting* of Coleridge's poem'.⁵⁰

The sailor's guilt – like the guilt of Southey's Martha Ray in 'The Mad Woman' – is traced to an unquestioned, explicitly identified crime. Unlike the shooting of the albatross, the torture of the female slave is stripped of all ambiguity. The tale is also stripped of any distracting supernatural embellishments – a direct swipe at Coleridge's (and Wordsworth's) lack of historicised legitimacy. The ambiguous moral and radical indeterminism (of subject, frame and agenda) of 'The Ancient Mariner' are replaced by Southey's public-facing didacticism, as the sympathetic reader is encouraged to reaffirm and act on their knowledge of the inhumanities performed in the name of the slave trade. As witnessed above, Southey did not believe that reliance on superstition could ever result in societal reform. While Coleridge harboured his own doubts as to Wordsworth's deployment of popular magic as a mode of enfranchisement (as demonstrated in Chapter 4), Southey felt 'The Ancient Mariner' to be too preoccupied with this debate with Wordsworth, too bound up within its own internal confusions and psychological complexities, to be an ethically efficacious force. In writing 'The Sailor', Southey correctively recast Coleridge's tale, freed from Wordsworthian distractions, in order to deliver a clear, morally unequivocal message grounded in abolitionism.

David Chandler argues that the tale of the Old Woman of Berkeley in 'A Ballad, shewing how an old woman rode double, and who rode before her'⁵¹ is also a

⁵⁰ Carol Bolton, *Writing the Empire: Robert Southey and Colonialism* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), p. 45.

⁵¹ Referred to hereafter as 'The Old Woman'.

corrective 'answer' to 'The Ancient Mariner'. Southey needed to challenge Coleridge's radical treatment of the traditional ballad form. Southey's 'Old Woman', Chandler claims, 'was an attempt to undo what Coleridge had done, to restore the pure stream of "German sublimity"'.⁵² Prefaced by an extract from Matthew of Westminster's *Flowers of History* in a bid to prove how little the source material had been embellished or altered, the poem underwent a process of historicisation to ensure authenticity and 'narrative conviction'. As Chandler argues,

[Southey's] recipe for a modern supernatural ballad was to take a genuinely old story concerned with a supernatural event and to write it as if with complete faith in its credibility, 'in the spirit of the elder poets.' The power of 'The Old Woman' . . . lay in its impressive lack of any subversive, 'enlightened' sentiment.⁵³

This, Southey claimed, was 'the ballad of a ballad-maker, believing the whole superstition, and thereby making even the grotesque terrible'.⁵⁴ The supernatural arena present in Southey's 'Old Woman' is indicative of a complete narrative submersion in the cultures and beliefs of the past. As Chandler has it:

⁵² David Chandler, 'Southey's "German Sublimity" and Coleridge's "Dutch Attempt"', *Romanticism on the Net* (2003), <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n32-33/009257ar.html?lang=en>> [accessed 25 May 2013] (para. 8 of 15).

⁵³ Chandler, 'Southey's "German Sublimity" and Coleridge's "Dutch Attempt"' (para. 12 of 15).

⁵⁴ Robert Southey, quoted in John Warden Robberds, *Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late William Taylor of Norwich*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1843), II, p. 112.

He saw in 'The Ancient Mariner' only an attempt to enlarge, aggrandize and modernize the ballad form without the firm foundation of a 'known fable' and without a convincingly feigned belief in the genuinely supernatural. An accumulation of detail and some sublime obscurity did not, in his opinion, compensate for the absence of clear, connected incident and a properly historicized narrative perspective.⁵⁵

Southey challenged the complex fabling of *Lyrical Ballads*, indicting the fabric of Wordsworth and Coleridge's ballads as dangerously close to a Burkean rhetoric – discursively bewitching, but potentially ideologically (and historically) misleading. Again, I argue that the supernatural is relocated in the distant past in 'The Old Woman' as a corrective *rewriting* of 'The Ancient Mariner'; it is a relic made 'authentic' by a *historicised* narrative and by the complete removal of contemporary political and social matters – wholly and firmly embedded in a past age. Contemporary social issues, on the other hand, were completely stripped of all supernaturalism in 'The Sailor', where the supernatural is replaced by candid horror, and presented in an uncomplicated and unembellished way that ensured the efficacy of the socio-political thrust of the poem.

⁵⁵ Chandler, 'Southey's "German Sublimity" and Coleridge's "Dutch Attempt"' (para. 12 of 15).

Southey's Orientalism: *Thalaba the Destroyer*

In May 1799, shortly after the publication of *Poems 1799*, Southey wrote to his wife Edith, informing her of the publication of Coleridge's 'France an Ode' in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1798*⁵⁶ under the title 'The Recantation':

Coleridge's Ode upon France is printed in the Spirit of the Public Journals under the title of the Recantation. How will he like this, & how will they like it who do not allow it to be a recantation? Mary Hays askd me if I too had changed my principles. Had she known more of me I should have been hurt at the question.⁵⁷

'France: An Ode' (written April 1798) registered Coleridge's disappointment following the French occupation of Switzerland, effectively recanting his previous support of the French Republic. Coleridge had chosen to change the poem's title for publication in his own quarto to 'France: An Ode', but Southey would almost certainly have been aware of its publication in the *Morning Post* of 16 April 1798 under its original title 'The Recantation: An Ode'. By 1799, however, Southey appears to believe that Coleridge would have been aghast at the political implications of the word 'recantation'. Southey found it difficult to distinguish between Coleridge's condemnation of the violent actions of the French Republic (shown especially in their invasion of Switzerland), and an abandonment of the entire principles of Republicanism in his

⁵⁶ *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1798, being an impartial selection of the most exquisite and jeux d'esprits, principally prose, that appear in the newspapers and other publications* (London, 1799), pp. 357–9.

⁵⁷ *Southey Letters*, 410.

poetry of the late 1790s, especially 'The Ancient Mariner'. These distinctions were increasingly blurred by Coleridge's attempts to invest in Wordsworthian cultures of popular magic. I wish to argue that, concerned his former Pantisocratic partner had completely turned his back on his former radical hopes, Southey attempted to rekindle Coleridge's enthusiasm for the principles of republicanism by composing a corrective response to Coleridge's recantations – a response deeply invested in Coleridgean discourses of popular prophecy and its proximity to material occult practice.

In July-August 1799, Southey and Coleridge embarked on a new joint project, an epic detailing the life of the Islamic prophet Mohammed and his conquest of the holy city of Mecca. By the end of the year Coleridge's interest in 'The Flight and Return of Mohammed' had emphatically waned, but Southey persevered with the poem until he finally abandoned it (still in its planning stages) in July 1800, in an effort to concentrate his efforts on *Thalaba*. The extant fragments of the project, including Coleridge's 'Mahomet', which had been intended as the book's epitaph, reveal what Humberto Garcia has called 'Coleridge's and Southey's youthful enthusiasm for the 1798–99 French campaign to bring Islamic liberty to Egypt'.⁵⁸ Coleridge's 'Mahomet' reveals an early anxiety about the Egyptian 'liberation', characterised by the 'mad shouts' of the people and the destructive (and potentially uncontrollable) river 'all rushing impetuous forward' in an allegory of the revolutionary fanaticism he had recanted in his 1798 quarto.⁵⁹ Garcia suggests that 'The Flight and Return of

⁵⁸ Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670–1840* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 158.

⁵⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Mahomet: A Fragment', *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works (Reading Texts) Part 1*, ed. J. C.C. Mays (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 568–71, p. 571.

Mohammed' was ultimately dropped by the poets owing to its explicit Jacobinism, and the failure of the French colonization of Egypt, which was by no means welcomed as 'liberation' by the Egyptian people. Southey grew increasingly disappointed with revolutionary politics, especially following Napoleon's assumption of the role of sole dictator in the coup d'état of 10 November 1799. Any attempts to continue with 'The Flight and Return of Mohammed' were doomed to fail. As both Carol Bolton and Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch have argued, Southey struggled with the 'poetic sincerity' of holding up Mohammed (the moral 'imposter') and the institutionalised Islam that had been tainted by false prophecy, as a model of morality:⁶⁰

Whether Mohammed be a hero likely to blast a poem in a Christian country is doubtful. My Mohammed will be, what I believe the Arabian was in the beginning of his career, sincere in enthusiasm – & it would puzzle a casuist to distinguish between the belief of inspiration & the actual impulse.⁶¹

Southey felt that contemporary readings of Islam had become too bound up in the Franco-Jacobin politics of the French invasion of Egypt (Napoleon had described the French as 'true Muslims' in an effort to appease the Egyptians). His political affiliations during the period 1799–1801 were particularly complex. In December 1799, Southey revealed to Coleridge his waning enthusiasm for the French Republic:

⁶⁰ Carol Bolton, *Thalaba the Destroyer: Southey's Nationalist Romance, Romanticism on the Net* (2003), <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2004/v/n32-33/009260ar.html?lang=en>> [accessed 06 June 2013] (para. 12 of 31), and Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch, *Robert Southey* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), p. 84.

⁶¹ *Southey Letters*, 486.

Concerning the French I wish Buonaparte had staid in Egypt & that Robespierre had guillotined Sieyes. These cursed complex governments are good for nothing, & will ever be in the hands of intriguers . . . The cause of republicanism is over, & it is now only a struggle for dominion. There wanted a Lycurgus after Robespierre – a man loved for his virtue, & bold & inflexible, who should have levelled the property of France, & then would the Republic have been immortal, & the world must have been revolutionized by example. At present I have the true Cynic growl – softening down into Stoical – not Epicurean apathy.⁶²

Southey's reference to an 'Epicurean apathy' strikingly keys his comments in to the phrase Coleridge had used a matter of months before in a letter to Wordsworth, begging him to continue writing the millenarian project of 'The Recluse':

My dear friend, I do entreat you go on with 'The Recluse'; and I wish you would write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophes.⁶³

⁶² *Southey Letters*, 466.

⁶³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 527.

Wordsworth, of course, would come to ignore Coleridge's pleas to compose a morally regenerative poetical work; instead, he found himself embraced in the autobiographical epic *The Prelude* (in many ways, a *Recluse* reconfigured). One might see Southey's letter as a reminder to Coleridge that he dared to hope for their shared republican vision, even though his support of the French Republic had been severely tested. He remained committed to the socially reformist attitudes he had displayed in *Poems 1799* and to the principles of liberty and freedom at the centre of his youthful republicanism; however, growing disillusionment with the expansionism of the revolutionaries in Europe heralded the emergence of the conservatism that would characterise Southey's later years.

A return to *Thalaba the Destroyer* (which had lingered in the planning stages since August 1798) marked Southey's desire to reengage with the ancient, pure form of Islam that appealed to his Unitarian sympathies. *Thalaba* is the tale of a young Arabian boy, chosen by the heavens to defeat the Domdaniel, a tyrannical coven of sorcerers, and avenge his father's murder.⁶⁴ The final lines of *Thalaba* see the collapse of the evil Domdaniel, and the Arabian hero is reunited with his Bedouin bride, Oneiza, in Heaven. As readers, we are left unaware of the effect that the overthrow of the Domdaniel has on a wider society. The death of Thalaba, and the abrupt ending of the final book, ensure that we do not discover the nature of the system of government that will replace the Domdaniel's tyranny. The ending calls Southey's political intentions into question. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch's 1977 biography of Southey suggests that *Thalaba* marked Southey's wish to retire from a political activism that

⁶⁴ For Southey's depiction of the central plot of *Thalaba* see *Southey Letters*, 368.

had caused him (and his fellow radicals) so much disappointment in the closing years of the 1790s:

At once merely personal and vaguely metaphysical, daemonic and domestic, Thalaba's quest wholly lacks a political middle ground: his victory, while purporting to be an act of universal redemption, produces no visible practical good other than his own promotion to beatitude . . . the poem represents, in fact, a complete political disengagement.⁶⁵

However, at several points throughout the poem a lack of social and political responsibility is exposed as damaging. For instance, the former chosen one, Othatha, is trapped in the caves of the Domdaniel as punishment for being distracted from his mission by domestic attractions, as he lingers past the auspicious hour 'in the arms of love'.⁶⁶ Unconvinced that Southey's text advocates an apolitical retirement, Carol Bolton argues that *Thalaba* actually exposes a burgeoning conservatism. In this reading, Southey's former radicalism is replaced with a British nationalism that had been reinforced by his exploration of other ('other') cultures:

Southey's more conservative approach to the values of his own culture (which he was at odds with for so long) was formed by his responses to the Orientalist material of his poem. Having more empathy now with the British model of

⁶⁵ Bernhardt-Kabisch, *Robert Southey*, p. 94.

⁶⁶ Robert Southey, *Thalaba the Destroyer*, ed. Tim Fulford, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), III, Book 12, l. 89.

polity and religion, his investigation of other cultures as material for *Thalaba* only reinforced these views.⁶⁷

Most recently, Garcia has suggested that *Thalaba* has a 'basic Unitarian plot structure'⁶⁸ that neither calls for a 'complete political disengagement', nor introduces a 'traditional conservatism that exchanges radical politics for domestic quietism'.⁶⁹ Further, Garcia argues that Southey wished to promote a version of Islam, stripped of corrupt despotism and the false prophecies of Mohammed, as part of a republican-Unitarianism dissociated from French-Islamic Jacobin political prejudice. As Garcia suggests:

Thalaba is a republican-Unitarian allegory that rewrites 'Mohammed' to deflect attention away from colonial and autocratic forms of Napoleonic governance while remaining committed to a politics of radical change that, ideally, cannot be compromised by recent events.⁷⁰

For Garcia, this 'radical change' is achieved by the destruction of the evil Domdaniel by the enlightened, unipersonal deism of the uninstitutionalised *Thalaba*.

I argue that Southey's Arabian epic can be usefully read as a psychobiographical narrative of his struggles with (and guilt concerning) a period of particularly complex personal and political apostasy. To date, few scholarly

⁶⁷ Bolton, 'Southey's Nationalist Romance' (para. 2 of 31).

⁶⁸ Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment*, p. 173.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 177–8.

examinations of *Thalaba* have identified a relationship between Southey's epic and Coleridge's poetry of the late 1790s. In an attempt to showcase Southey's centrality to the poetic discourses of Romanticism, Marilyn Butler has suggested that:

Thalaba shows better than the review what the grounds of [Southey's criticism of 'The Ancient Mariner'] were. Particularly near the beginning and end, Southey's poem repeatedly brings to mind Coleridge's poem, inviting comparison, setting up a dialogue between the two.⁷¹

The spiritual quest genre and individual episodes, such as the slaying of the camel in Book 4 (a re-imagining of the shooting of the albatross) and the moral tale told by Aswad in Book 1, configure parallels between Southey's epic and Coleridge's ballad. Southey, Butler argues, engages with the same themes of guilt, punishment and omen present in 'The Ancient Mariner', but removes all moral ambiguity in an attempt to remedy those elements of Coleridge's poem that Southey had criticised in his review. Butler's argument concentrates on the relocation of Southey at the centre of the Romantic literary canon, but her analysis does not explore *Thalaba* as a riposte to 'The Ancient Mariner' in any great detail. However, her suggestion that *Thalaba* was written with Coleridge's poetry of the late 1790s in mind – although brief – is insightful.

For disillusioned radicals in the late 1790s a prescribed path (or fate) offered an opportunity to deny political and social responsibility. Subscribing to a historical

⁷¹ Butler, 'Repossessing the Past', p. 77.

model that took matters completely out of their control may have alleviated individual guilt, but it would also ensure that future generations could not learn from the mistakes of their fathers. Future-telling became an unquestionably political act, dangerously susceptible to manipulation and corruption. My reading of Southey's *Thalaba* presents the sprawling epic as a response to the disillusionments of the French Revolution. I contend that by setting *Thalaba* in the oriental cultures of the East, Southey could explore the radical possibilities of prognostication – but at a safe distance from England, free from the contemporary political disappointments that had rendered the ultimate goal of republicanism unreadable.

There are various modalities of magic at play in *Thalaba*. The occult practiced within the Domdaniel is ritualistic, heretical and maleficent – a powerful ancient magic practised by sorcerers. The sinister magicians are driven by despotism and power – similar, in their way, to those figures that Southey deployed in his responses to Wordsworth's magical practitioners in *Poems 1799*, but now invested with explicitly magical identities at a safe geographical distance from Southey's England. In his *Commonplace Book*, Southey wrote:

Cannot the Dom Danael [*sic*] be made to allegorize those systems that make the misery of mankind? . . . Can the evils of established systems be well allegorised?⁷²

⁷² Robert Southey, *Southey's Common-Place Book*, ed. John Wood Warter (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1851), pp. 182–3.

In the hands of the sorcerers, magic becomes a tool of oppression and manipulative despotism – a familiar allegory of the tyrannies that Southey attempted to confront in *Poems 1799*. In Book 7 of *Thalaba*, for instance, the powerful sorcerer Aloadin ensnares those who are ‘Marked by their horoscope’ (*Thalaba*, Book 6, l. 224) to live in his garden Paradise. Once ensnared, his ‘faithful servants’ are forced to ‘wreak his wicked will, and work all crimes’, tempted by ultimately misleading promises of the ‘joys of Heaven’ (*Thalaba*, Book 7, ll. 104–6). As Carol Bolton suggests,

Southey continually makes a contrast between the private, moral lives of desert dwellers and large ‘degraded’ centres of population, where the inhabitants are shown as degenerate, invidious worshippers of superstition and tyranny.⁷³

Thalaba quickly flees the garden, which he discovers to be a den of debauchery, temptation and sin. In his description of Aloadin’s tyrannical rule of the paradise-like garden, Southey can be seen to recall the occult discourses of the revolution controversy:

The blinded multitude
Ador'd the Sorcerer,
And bent the knee before him,
And shouted out his praise,

⁷³ Bolton, ‘Southey’s Nationalist Romance’ (para. 28 of 31).

'Mighty art thou, the Bestower of joy,

'The Lord of Paradise!'

Aloadin waved his hand,

In idolizing reverence,

Moveless they stood and mute.

(*Thalaba*, Book 7, ll. 207–15)

The sorcerer enchants his captives into a state of inescapable idolatry. Aloadin's rule is an allegory of a revolution-gone-wrong. Blinded by revolutionary future-telling, British radicals (including Coleridge and Southey himself) had been enslaved by false promises and found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the dangerously tyrannical French Republic and the *ancien regimes* it had replaced. The despotic sorcerer-tyrant allegorises, not only the established system in the early days of the French Revolution, but also the Jacobinical jugglery that had enthralled Southey and his fellow radicals. The overthrow of Aloadin's garden, conversely, might be taken as a narrative of successful revolution. The revolutionary champion Thalaba represents an enlightened republicanism that exists outside Aloadin's bewitching systems of control.

By the end of the decade, Southey had not completely disregarded the *principles* of republicanism. In a letter to John Rickman of January 1800, he outlined the lack of morality that had ensured the corruption of the French Revolution:

The French are children with the physical force of men, unworthy, & therefore incapable of freedom. Once I had hopes – the Jacobines might have done much

– but the base of morality was wanting, & where could the corner stone be laid? They have retarded our progress for a century to come.⁷⁴

Despite this, Southey continued to believe that in the right (enlightened) hands, republicanism as a system could secure true liberty. The Bedouin family (Thalaba, his adoptive father Moath, and his sister/bride Oneiza) become representative of the morally pure, uninstitutionalised radicalism that Southey had hoped the French Republic would establish. The Bedouin tribe represent an idealised, rural, socially equal and self-supporting society – strikingly similar to some of the earlier theorisations of the domestic Pantisocratic ideal. As Carol Bolton has noted,

Western commentators readily perceived the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins as one of independence and resistance to the corruption of political systems, particularly those of the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁵

The wealth of footnotes dedicated to describing, in detail, aspects of the Bedouins' everyday life in Book 3 suggests the significance of their social ideology to Southey at this time:

The simplicity, or, perhaps, more properly, the poverty, of the lower class of the Bedouins, is proportionate to that of their chiefs. All the wealth of a family consists of moveables . . . We must not therefore, when we speak of the

⁷⁴ *Southey Letters*, 476.

⁷⁵ Bolton, 'Southey's Nationalist "Romance"' (para. 20 of 31).

Bedouins, affix to the words Prince and Lord, the ideas they usually convey; we should come nearer the truth, by comparing them to substantial farmers, in mountainous countries, whose simplicity they resemble in their dress, as well as in their domestic life and manners.⁷⁶

Associated with suggestive echoes of Paine's politicised philosophy of language, the Bedouin represent an uncomplicated force for good within the text. Despite the best efforts of the sorcerers, Thalaba and his family do not succumb to the temptations of magical power and remain faithful only to the powers of the Heavens. Thalaba's adoptive Bedouin family also escapes the influence of religious establishments, practising individual, private worship without any interference from institutional mediators:

What if beneath no lamp-illuminated dome,
Its marble walls bedecked with flourished truth,
Azure and gold adornment? sinks the Word
With deeper influence from the Imam's voice,
Where in the day of congregation, crowds
Perform the duty-task?
Their Father is their Priest,
The Stars of Heaven their point of prayer,

⁷⁶ Constantin-François Volney, *Travels Through Syria and Egypt, in the Years 1783, 1784, and 1785* (1787), quoted in Robert Southey, 'Southey's Notes to Thalaba', *Thalaba the Destroyer*, ed. Tim Fulford, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), III, pp. 193–299, p.216.

And the blue Firmament
The glorious Temple, where they feel
The present Deity.

(*Thalaba*, Book 3, ll. 301–11)

Importantly in terms of my own argument, the Bedouins ‘at all points, are less superstitious than the Turks’.⁷⁷ They use the stars, not to prognosticate the future, but to locate the Keabê: ‘the point of direction, and the centre of union for the prayers of the whole human race’.⁷⁸ This enlightened society represents the republican community that Southey and his fellow radicals had dreamed of in the early days of the revolution, untainted by the odium of contemporary European politics.

Reading ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and the 1798 folio, Southey had been wary of Coleridge’s radical recantations, and was concerned that his friend would entirely denounce his radical roots, especially when Coleridge lost interest in their joint project ‘Mohammed’. *Thalaba* exists as an appeal to Coleridge, encouraging him to remember the ultimate goal of liberty at the heart of their Republican hopes, calling on images of domestic bliss borrowed from their plans for an idealistic Pantisocratic society, and functioning as an appeal against capitulation. A single driving prophecy exists throughout Southey’s lengthy epic – the destruction of the evil institution of the Domdaniel by Thalaba, the heavenly-appointed destroyer:

⁷⁷ Charles Sigisbert Sonnini, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt by M. Sonnini Performed in the Years 1777 and 1778* (1799), quoted in Southey, ‘Southey’s Notes to *Thalaba*’, p. 215.

⁷⁸ Didot Ignace Mouradja D’Ohsson, *Tableau Général de l’Empire Othoman* (1789), quoted in Southey, ‘Southey’s Notes to *Thalaba*’, p. 218.

Son of Hodeirah, thou art chosen forth
To do the will of Heaven;
To avenge thy Father's death,
The murder of thy race,
To work the mightiest enterprize
That mortal man hath wrought.
Live! and remember Destiny
Hath marked thee from mankind!'

(*Thalaba*, Book 1, ll. 662–9)

This prophecy is repeated at several points throughout the tale, especially at those moments that test Thalaba's faith in God. In Southey's narrative, the destruction of tyranny, analogous to the fall of the Domdaniel, is the final prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled:

Masters of the mighty Spell,
Mutter o'er your words of power!
Ye can shatter the dwellings of man,
Ye can open the womb of the rock,
Ye can shake the foundations of earth,
But not the word of God:
But not one letter can ye change
Of what his Will hath written!

(*Thalaba*, Book 2, ll. 215–22)

However, the sorcerers attempt to manipulate and change the course of 'true' prophecy using magic, oracles and astrological counter-readings. In Book 2, in our first glimpse of the maleficent Domdaniel, Khawla, the 'fiercest of the enchanter brood' (*Thalaba*, Book 2, l. 123), suggests that although the events of the future are prescribed, her sinister coterie have the power to inflect the course of destiny:

Thy fate and ours were on the lot,
And we believ'd the lying stars
That said thy hand might seize the auspicious hour!
Thou hast let slip the reins of Destiny . . .
Curse thee, curse thee, Okba!"

(*Thalaba*, Book 2, ll. 51–5)

In Book 9, Khawla instructs her sister, Maimuna the witch, to astrologically read the stars. However, when the celestial bodies do not predict a favourable outcome, Khawla denies the accuracy of the reading and determines to re-prognosticate a future more suited to her own purposes in the hope that this will reconfigure the future:

'What hast thou read? What hast thou read?'
Quoth Khawla in alarm.
'Danger . . . death . . . judgement!' Maimuna replied.

'Is that the language of the lights of Heaven?'

Exclaimed the sterner Witch.

'Creatures of Allah, they perform his will,

And with their lying menaces would daunt

Our credulous folly . . . Maimuna,

I never liked this uncongenial lore!

Better befits to make the sacrifice

Of Divination; so shall I

Be mine own Oracle.

(*Thalaba*, Book 9, ll. 12–23)

Khawla's reproboscations reflect the complexities of 1790s acts of political divination. The sheer number of contrasting predictions and counter-predictions made by both radical and reactionaries made future-telling a particularly dangerous mode of political intervention, as it encouraged religious and political fanaticism among both educated and uneducated people.

In his *Letters from England* (1808) Southey adopted the persona of Spanish traveller Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella to comment on his experiences in England – providing an opportunity for the poet to look at his home country through the defamiliarising lens of an outsider. In this piece of culturally introspective pseudo – or meta – travel writing, Southey exposes the superstitions of his nation. Thus, the ravings of the millenarian prophet Richard Brothers are figured as contagious and entrancing Enthusiasm: 'When a mad-man calls himself inspired, from that moment

the disorder becomes infectious'.⁷⁹ These 'epidemics of the mind' cause people to be bewitched by false prophets, both religious and political:

He announced to his believers his intention of speedily setting out for Jerusalem, to take possession of his metropolis, and invited them to accompany him. Some of these poor people actually shut up their shops, forsook their business, and their families, and travelled from distant parts of the country to London to join him, and depart with him whenever he gave the word.⁸⁰

Both religious and political fanaticism, Southey argues, leads unsuspecting people to abandon their domestic and social responsibilities. Genuine social reform cannot ensue. The false prophecies of the French Revolution, Southey hoped, would not be able to derail the true course of liberty, just as the evil machinations of the sorcerers in *Thalaba* are unable to disrupt providence.

Southey's fascination with modes of prognostication stemmed partly from his connections in Bristol. As Marilyn Butler observed in *Literature as a Heritage* (1988), Southey was fascinated by the orient and the wider world with which his home city of Bristol traded.⁸¹ Owing partly to the same mercantile links that had sparked Southey's interest in orientalism, the city had a strong concentration of liberal dissenters – both religious and political. Throughout his poetic career, Southey maintained friendships

⁷⁹ Robert Southey, *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, Translated from the Spanish* (New York: George Dearborn, 1836), p. 155.

⁸⁰ Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 189.

⁸¹ Marilyn Butler, *Literature as a Heritage' or Reading Other Ways* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 9.

with various individuals who were fascinated with millenarian prophecy. His circle of acquaintances included astrologers, prophets and their followers; men such as William Gilbert, William Sharp (an engraver and the man responsible for bringing Joanna Southcott to London in 1802), James Crease and Samuel Whitchurch (both followers of Richard Brothers), William Owen Pughe (translator of Welsh medieval texts and ‘one of Joanna Southcott’s four & twenty Elders’),⁸² and William Bryan (a copper-plate printer, associate of fellow engraver William Blake, and self-professed prophet). In December 1794 (shortly after meeting Southey in October that year),⁸³ Bryan claimed to have had a vision in which an ethereal voice prophesied the horrific destruction of Bristol, owing to its connections to the slave trade: ‘woe is to the city of Bristol! The cry of innocent blood is against it: it shall be taken and fall’.⁸⁴ Following another vision in early 1789, Bryan journeyed with John Wright to Avignon, France, to seek out the Society of Avignon prophets. Ultimately unfulfilled by their discoveries on the continent, Bryan and Wright (the ‘honest dupes’ as Southey designated them in *Letters from England*) became followers of Richard Brothers. Southey would also be alarmed by the incredulity of Pughe when it came to the ‘demonical witchcraft’ and ‘bewitching allurements’ of Southcott – a description of the prophetess that demonstrated the dual modalities of occult practice that her identity encapsulated.

⁸² Robert Southey to William Taylor July c.1807, see *Romantic Circles: Robert Southey and Millenarianism* (2012), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_prophecy/HTML/Prophets.html>, [accessed 01.05.16].

⁸³ In a letter of late October 1794 Southey stated that ‘tomorrow I am to be introduced to a prophet!’ Clarke Garrett has argued that ‘the prophet was almost certainly William Bryan’. See Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and French Revolution in France and England* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 175.

⁸⁴ William Bryan, ‘A Testimony of the Spirit of Truth Concerning Richard Brothers’, *Prophetical Passages, Concerning the Present Times, in which the Person, Character, Mission &c. &c. of Richard Brothers, is Clearly Pointed at as the Elijah of the Present Day, the Bright Star to Guide the Hebrews* (London: G. Riebau, 1795), pp. 5-6.

For Southey, the incredulity of these men, whom he otherwise respected, represented the worrying dissemination of popular prophecy and superstition more generally – discoverable not just among the illiterate or labouring classes, but also, clearly, among educated men of his own social class. ‘And these things’, he lamented in *Letters from England*, ‘are believed in England! In England where Catholic Christians are so heartily despised for their superstitions: in England where the people think themselves so highly enlightened, – in this country of reason, and philosophy, and free inquiry’.⁸⁵ Despite his concerns regarding dangerous fanaticism, however, Southey found himself increasingly compelled by various modalities of the occult – an interest that extended beyond his oriental studies. As evidenced by the individuals who composed his circle of acquaintances, his ownership of a large collection of pamphlets regarding popular prophecy (including texts by Southcott and Bryan)⁸⁶ and the lengthy discussions dedicated to various forms of magical practice in *Letters from England*, Southey was preoccupied with the superstitions, fanaticism and modes of popular millenarian prophecy that operated in his own contemporary England. In *Letters from England*, he indicated that the otherwise respectable Nathaniel Brassey Halhead’s interest in Brothers had stemmed from his oriental studies. As Fulford has it, Southey feared that Halhead’s was a cautionary tale; Southey nervously viewed the now disgraced MP as a potential ‘doppelganger of Southey himself’.⁸⁷ However, I argue that it was their shared fascination with forms of occult practice operating closer to home that truly concerned Southey – an anxiety that surfaces in *Thalaba*.

⁸⁵ Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 442.

⁸⁶ See Fulford, ‘Introduction’, *Romantic Circles: Robert Southey and Millenarianism* (2012), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_prophecy/HTML/intro.html>, [accessed 01.05.16].

⁸⁷ Fulford, ‘Introduction’, *Romantic Circles: Robert Southey and Millenarianism* (2012), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_prophecy/HTML/intro.html>, [accessed 01.05.16].

At several points throughout *Thalaba the Destroyer*, the reader glimpses modalities of the occult that more closely resemble the popular magic practised in Britain than arcane Arabian sorcery; born, I argue, out of Southey's preoccupation with *Lyrical Ballads* as a resonant site of personal and political struggle. Tim Fulford describes the sorceress Khawla as a dangerous yet alluring figure of fanaticism for Southey:

Southey is disgusted, but enthralled as well. Khawla, ironically enough, reveals not just his desire to stigmatize Oriental beliefs, but his fascination with them . . . Khawla configured Southey's attraction to, as well as fear of, the millenarianism that, as an increasingly orthodox moralist and political conservative, he wanted to extirpate from Britain.⁸⁸

Khawla, Fulford suggests, is the embodiment of the fanatical disease that had swept 1790s Britain, spread by the ravings of millenarian prophets such as Richard Brothers. This depiction of fanaticism as corporeal pathology is particularly apt. Southey believed that the dangerous infection of popular prophecy could only be 'anchored' by governmental forces at the site of the false prophet's body – through physical incarceration either in jail or in an insane asylum.⁸⁹ His anxieties regarding fanaticism

⁸⁸ Tim Fulford, 'Pagodas and Pregnant Throes: Orientalism, Millenarianism and Robert Southey', *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 121–38, p. 130.

⁸⁹ See Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 434 and his suggestion to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn in a letter of September 1806 that 'it would be a fit thing to ship her & a ship load of her disciples off for Botany Bay'. See 'Prophets in Southey's Manuscripts and Correspondence', *Robert Southey and Millenarianism: Documents Concerning the Prophetic Movements of the Romantic Era*, ed. Tim Fulford (July 2012), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/southey_prophecy/HTML/Prophets.html>, [accessed 15 May 2015].

are frequently focused on material, rather than philosophical, manifestations of occult practice. Southey's later depictions of Southcott in particular would be focused on the uncanny 'other' of the 'infected' female body as being the site of her 'bewitching allurements' and 'demonic witchcraft'.⁹⁰ She is described in *Letters from England*, for instance, as 'old' and 'vulgar' – suggestive of her status as witch-like hag figure. His female sorceress is similarly 'a source of infection', and yet she also represents Southey's fearful fascination with fanaticism, contained here at a safe distance from home.

Fulford's conservative Southey attempts to inoculate his readers against 'religious and political fanaticism' by 'depicting the dangers of fanaticism so as better to contrive its defeat'.⁹¹ When Khawla is defeated, the dangerous Enthusiasm that she embodied is controlled, evacuated from Southey's vision of a politically settled Britain:

Thus his Orientalist fiction allowed him an opportunity both to explore dangerous enthusiasms and to arrange for their suppression.⁹²

For Fulford, Khawla's oriental 'otherness' is a site of radical anxiety for the newly conservative Southey. However, I suggest that by 1801, Southey was still at odds with his own increasing conservatism. *Thalaba*, like *Poems 1799*, provides a stage for his residual (although arguably fading) radicalism. Southey is both repulsed and allured by Khawla (and, indeed, the other magicians of the Domdaniel), but I contend that it is her uncanny *familiarity* – rather than her points of 'otherness' – that he finds

⁹⁰ Southey, *Letters from England*, p. 433.

⁹¹ Fulford, 'Pagodas and Pregnant Throes', p. 130.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

particularly terrifying. These familiarities manifest themselves, I argue, in references to a rural, English occult, reminiscent of the Wordsworthian characters in *Lyrical Ballads*.

Although *Thalaba* is set at a safe distance from a contemporary Britain, Southey's political anxieties are further troubled by intrusions from within the Wordsworthian occult of the 1790s. In Book 9, Khawla goes into the woods to source the magical mandrake and manchineel to create a waxen image of Thalaba:

What Woman is she
So wrinkled and old,
That goes to the wood?
She leans on her staff
With a tottering step,
She tells her bead-strings slow
Through fingers dull'd by age.
The wanton boys bemock her;
The babe in arms that meets her,
Turns round with quick affright,
And clings to his nurse's neck.

(*Thalaba*, Book 9, ll. 233–43)

It is significant that the witch-like disguise that Khawla adopts bears a striking similarity to the descriptions of Old Margery in 'The Witch', and to Wordsworth's description of Goody Blake. Khawla's adopted rural occult persona registers the disenfranchisement that comes with age. The local children (like those in 'The Witch'

who pelt Old Margery with snowballs) are terrified of her. Contemporary popular magic in Britain provides a further influence for *Thalaba* in the character of the witch Maimuna. Thalaba stumbles upon a cave where Maimuna sits, spinning her magical thread and muttering an 'unintelligible song'. Spinning is the job that Wordsworth's Goody Blake is employed with during daylight hours. Maimuna's thread is a trap, spun to ensnare an unsuspecting Thalaba, who perceives no danger from this seemingly innocent figure. She wraps her thread around Thalaba's hands as she continues her enchanting song, challenging him to try and break the fibre:

Now twine it round thy hands I say,
Now twine it round thy hands I pray,
My thread is small, my thread is fine,
But he must be
A stronger than thee,
Who can break this thread of mine!

(*Thalaba*, Book 8, ll. 334–9)

Once Thalaba has been wound in the trap, Maimuna reveals her true self – Khawla's wicked sister. For Southey, Khawla and her sibling represent the dangers of the Wordsworthian reliance on popular magic: it is ultimately a despotic conservatism, veiled by an image of the occult practitioner as an agent of radical social reform.

The English occult guises of Khawla and Maimuna appear out of place in an Arabian landscape. This did not go unnoticed by Southey's contemporary reviewers. A review of *Thalaba* by William Taylor for *The Critical Review* of 1803 notes that the

scene in which the witches spin their enchanted threads is 'more in the spirit of the Gothic than of Arabian fiction'.⁹³ It is understandable that Southey's exposure to surviving contemporary cultures of popular magic in Britain would, at points, provide a greater influence on *Thalaba* than the influences of Eastern magic which could be accessed only second-hand through travel narratives and oriental texts. However, I argue that this cultural displacement is a product of Southey's ongoing personal struggle between his radical roots and the conservatism that he began to find attractive, despite his own fear of completely abandoning his radical and republican principles. Again then, Khawla allows Southey to enact a fantasy of conservatism. The occult, identified earlier in *Poems 1799* as an inflection of an alluring conservatism and guilty radical abandonment, is finally suppressed in the defeat of the Domdaniel by the uninstitutionalised, Republican Bedouin hero.

However, it is problematic to regard the hero of *Thalaba* as an uncomplicated figure of Unitarian republican virtue – primarily owing to his own reliance on magic. The young Thalaba is by no means removed from superstition. He uses protective talismans (in the form of his talismanic ring) and is guided by prophecies and omens (such as the mysterious message interpreted from the markings of the desert locust). William Taylor's review suggests that, owing to the Bedouin hero's identity as an occult practitioner – 'a child of destiny, miraculously reared to destroy, by the seizure of talismans, a subterranean convent of magicians' – Thalaba has 'little to recommend him to our warm sympathy'.⁹⁴ Taylor (a personal acquaintance of Southey since 1798) argues that the conclusion of the poem fails to strike the desired note in

⁹³ William Taylor, *The Critical Review, Or, Annals of Literature* (December 1803), p. 376.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *The Critical Review*, p. 370

the hearts of its readers because the virtues of the hero are outweighed by the sensationalist grandeur of the material effects of the occult. 'Moral marvels', he noted,

do not act in the imagination like physical marvels. We attribute inferior powers to the mind, and superior powers to the matter, whose extraordinary operations are the subject of our wonder . . . Hence fanaticism, which generates moral miracles, is one of the worst – and magic, which generates physical miracles, one of the best – for a poet.⁹⁵

While Southey had kept 'within the prudent limits' of fanaticism in his earlier delineation of Joan of Arc, 'the characters of *Thalaba* have something supernatural in their turn of mind, which surely intercepts very much our fellow-feeling'.⁹⁶ Southey's own ambivalence and his dual loyalties are evident in his preoccupation with the very superstitious fanaticism against which he rails, and this manifests itself in the conflicted occult genetics of his own republican hero.

Southey's anxiety concerning his apostate political allegiances is perhaps best witnessed in an ultimately unused draft of Book 12 of *Thalaba*, which Fulford has termed a 'prequel' to Coleridge's 'Christabel'.⁹⁷ In late December 1800, shortly after his reconciliation with Coleridge, Southey sent a letter to Charles Watkin Williams

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 370-1.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 371

⁹⁷ Tim Fulford, 'Coleridge's Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey's Prequel to *Christabel*', *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient: Cultural Negotiations*, ed. David Vallins, Kaz Oishi and Seamus Perry (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013)

Wynn including a draft of the final book of *Thalaba*.⁹⁸ In a displaced restaging of the events of Coleridge's poem, Southey's draft sees his Bedouin hero battle with Sir Leoline, who has been bewitched by an 'old and hideous hag' – also depicted as 'the mother witch'. Leoline is revealed as the one-time champion of a virtuous maiden and her mother ('Our dear liege Lady, sovereign of our choice'). However, he had forsaken them after falling under the spell of the 'hell hag' and her son, who have usurped the lady's throne. The innocent voice of the maiden, spoken under the shade of the oak tree (a site of great spiritual significance to the displaced Queen), is powerful enough to break the spell. These characters were taken directly from the manuscript of Coleridge's 'Christabel', which he had requested several months earlier during a lonely self-exile in Lisbon.

Tim Fulford's 2013 essay 'Coleridge's Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey's Prequel to *Christabel*' works to unveil the multi-authored genesis of both *Thalaba* and 'Christabel' (poems that we would not normally identify as multi-authored) and investigates the profound influence that the poets had on each other's work. Fulford argues that Southey's engagement with 'Christabel' acted as a remedy for what he considered to be a lack of distinct 'hero' and 'villain' roles in Coleridge's unfinished poem:

Southey's prequel was also motivated by puzzlement and critique, as if he needed to dramatise in more straightforward narrative terms the moral ambiguity of 'Christabel' – where action gets suspended and who is guilty

⁹⁸ *Southey Letters*, 563.

cannot be decided. Thus, *Thalaba*, an oriental tale, gets sidetracked into the chivalric world of Coleridge's poem as Southey tries to resolve – to create a narrative of public actions and reactions to explain – the cause of the fall from innocence into guilt, and the redemption from this guilt.⁹⁹

Magic plays a central role in what we might call Southey's realignment of the moral aporiae of 'Christabel'. Coleridge's young maiden protagonist is bewitched by the evil Geraldine, but the fact that she is susceptible to the witch-like woman's power implies her complicit moral guilt – she is tainted by sexual knowledge following her seduction. This moral ambiguity was problematic for Southey, who instead cast Leoline as the spellbound victim in an attempt to write a more orthodox narrative – free from the internal domestic dramas of sin, shame and guilt that plague the protagonist of Coleridge's original. As Fulford has argued, good and evil 'do not coexist' in any of the characters in *Thalaba* 'unless that character is bewitched'.¹⁰⁰ Leoline is the victim of bewitching in this prequel to the events of 'Christabel' – a distinction that preserves Christabel as the innocent, virtuous heroine, and identifies the knight's guilty 'deeds of drunkenness/ And shame self-loathing' as the root of his susceptibility to Geraldine's dangerous allure in Coleridge's poem. Coleridge's characters, as inflected by Southey, are placed in more conventional roles of hero and villain, free from the 'paralysing' ambiguities of 'Christabel', and indicative of what Fulford has called the evacuation of 'moral complexity' in *Thalaba*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Fulford, 'Coleridge's Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey's Prequel to *Christabel*', p. 66.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

This evacuation of moral ambiguity sheds light on Southey's own apostate anxieties at the time he was composing *Thalaba* – anxieties that show themselves again in an engagement with magic and bewitchment. The overthrow of the Lady is achieved by the spells of the 'hell hag', which worked to enchant and enslave the 'infatuate multitude', 'All whom her witcheries / Made to their ruin blind'.¹⁰² Leoline's spell is broken when he recognises the voice of the damsel, spoken beneath the Oak tree.¹⁰³ The oak is a site of protective holy ground for the damsel and her mother, as well as a site of governmental and civil significance – this is where 'My Mother gave her laws'. The oak had also been used by Southey to symbolise England (his 1798 poem 'The Oak of Our Fathers', for instance, had allegorically depicted the British constitution as a great oak poisoned and consumed by the corrupting influence of a creeping ivy) – another example of haunting domestic political anxieties being figured in terms of oriental landscapes.¹⁰⁴

Thalaba is able to defeat the hell hag by means of illumination. His talismanic weapon is 'a torch of everlasting light'. Once Thalaba brandishes the torch he is able to reveal the mechanisms of corrupt despotism behind the bewitching rhetoric that had led many to be unquestioningly enslaved:

The deluded yield –

Before that holy Torch.

¹⁰² *Southey Letters*, 563.

¹⁰³ Of course, in Coleridge's poem Christabel's voice is controlled by Geraldine's spell – the significance of voice in the two 'versions' of the poem are thus brought into an interesting alignment.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Southey, 'The Oak of Our Fathers', *Selected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lynda Pratt, *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), V, pp. 335-6.

Awakened from the spell.¹⁰⁵

The magic of the witch is revealed as illusory, and it was necessary to reveal the legerdemain behind this trickery in order to defeat despotism. This can be read as a straightforward republican allegory – the eventual defeat of despotism by the champions of liberty. However, Southey was unhappy with this section of his work, remarking to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn that ‘with all this I am little satisfied. It is the worst part of the poem – far the worst’.¹⁰⁶ The lines were dropped from the published work. I suggest that Southey’s own creeping political apostasy and his increasingly guilt-ridden doubts concerning the revolution (and, indeed, republicanism in general) account for his dissatisfaction with his remedial prequel to ‘Christabel’. The depiction of the villain as a ‘witch’ (rather than sorcerer) suggests her proximity to practitioners of popular magic (and individuals who were accused of witchcraft) in England. I argue that – as was the case in the character of Khawla – Southey’s own political anxieties were characterised by an engagement with what he considered to be a Wordsworthian ‘mode’ of the occult. Southey is faced with his own moral ambiguity – he (in place of Leoline) suspects that he has been bewitched, both by the heady pronouncements of radical fanaticism and, indeed, by an increasingly alluring conservatism. As with Leoline, susceptibility to these enchantments denote an implication of personal guilt as he wrestles with a rejection of early republican sympathies. Southey, I argue, eliminated this section from the final version of *Thalaba* owing to this guilt, as he struggled with the shame of an increasing self-identification

¹⁰⁵ *Southey Letters*, 563.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

with the enchanted, morally compromised Leoline, rather than with the republican hero Thalaba.

Southey, unable to accede to the Wordsworthian manifesto of the occult as a vehicle of effective and lasting social emancipation, resisted the occult in his imaginative writings of the late 1790s. However, as I have suggested, his investment in the occult is far more complex than straightforward dismissal. For Southey, magic was dangerously ambiguous – both a disenfranchising agent that ensured hierarchical despotic dependence, and an inescapably alluring opportunity to explore a conservatism that began to appear increasingly appealing following the disappointments of the French Revolution. The appearance of a Wordsworthian occult in the oriental landscapes of *Thalaba* – a Southeyan response to the recantation of political prophecy and prognostication employed by Coleridge, and an appeal to his fellow radical not to retreat into ‘Epicurean apathy’ – reveals Southey’s ongoing struggle with his deepening conservatism in the closing years of the 1790s. The terrifyingly familiar traits of Khawla as an English magical practitioner emerge as an uncanny reflection of Southey himself, transforming him into a type – in place of Wordsworth, now – of the conservative narrators of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to conduct an investigation into the living, material cultures of popular magic that continued to operate throughout the Romantic period and beyond. This era has been largely –and unjustly – overlooked by historians of British occult practice. However, as the recent work of social historians such as Owen Davies and Richard Suggett have documented, the practice of popular magic, and the nexus of social and psychological relations surrounding cunning folk, were undoubtedly thriving in the decade that represents the focus of my study: 1790s. This newly excavated evidence reveals the continuing cultural and social significance of magical practitioners, and, as noted in my Introduction, prompts a historicisation of the period's imaginative literature from a new angle. In the course of this study, I have offered a template for reading Romanticism with these freshly unveiled contexts in mind. The texts that have provided my chosen focus constitute a wide range of genres and forms (ballad, epic, dramatic lyric/monologue, monthly periodical, biography, didactic pamphlet, polemical tract, closet drama) and represent both canonical and non-canonical texts, many of which are engaged in close dialogue.

As outlined above, any attempt to impose a dogmatic taxonomy onto the range of occult practices and beliefs that operated and circulated within the Romantic period runs the risk of erasing the nuances of this complex, interconnected culture. The adjacent cultures of freemasonry, stage magic, mesmerism, occult philosophy – to name but a few of the contemporary modalities that are to be considered as 'occult' practices or beliefs – have all provided important contexts for my investigations, interfused as they were with practices of popular magic, particularly in the public

mind. My principal focus, however, has been on the material incarnations of the occult associated with cunning folk, conjurors, and even witches (it is, after all, impossible to profile those individuals who claimed to combat malign magic without considering those against whom they defined their own identities and practice). Some cultural fields have been considered in greater detail owing to their proximity to these folk beliefs and practices. For instance, in a climate of political apprehension and uncertainty when any form of prognostication could be regarded as a dangerously radical act, certain branches of fanatical millenarian prophecy were regarded as cultish and occult (though we remember, of course, that prophesying a millennium foretold by Scripture was commonly accepted by orthodox Christianity). This was particularly true of those self-proclaimed prophets who announced themselves as privileged visionaries who had direct communication with God. Joanna Southcott was an exemplary case of a practitioner who embodied dual modalities of occult practice; her career as a prophetess had been in crucial ways enabled by her earlier practice as a Devonshire-based wise-woman. Popular forms of millenarian prophecy, therefore, have also provided a site of focus for this study owing not only to the points of contact and conflict between millenarianism and the practices of cunning folk (which frequently included future-telling in various forms), but also to the political anxieties bound up with prophecy during this tumultuous decade.

My opening chapter provided a profile of the living contours and resonances of popular magic during the 1790s in terms of its practitioners, clientele and ambiguous legal status in the wake of the 1735 Witchcraft Act. The neglect of the Romantic period in histories of occult practice is partly explained by the relative paucity of textual evidence from the period (particularly evidence penned by practitioners

themselves) as to the day-to-day practice and business of cunning folk. This scarcity of evidence has represented the greatest challenge in the course of this study. My opening chapter explores the *types* of evidence available to the social and literary historian, and investigates how these sources can be read to determine the cultural and social reach of the ecologies and economies of popular magic. The chapter includes three case studies, each examining different types of evidence and reading my chosen texts as literary artefacts with distinct rhetorical agendas. The first case study – comprising two chapbook-style pamphlets that act as biographies and memorialisations of the cunning men John Roberts and Richard Morris – reveal the position of these practitioners in local (and even national) economies. Though largely positive in their portrayal of their subjects, they also evince, as we have seen, an underlying scepticism regarding their subjects’ craft. The evangelical, didactic productions of Hannah More provide the focus for my second case study, which I read alongside two pamphlets produced in the wake of the execution of Mary Bateman, the notorious ‘Yorkshire Witch’ and convicted poisoner. I have argued that, while these texts register the perceived dangers of popular magic, their authors’ have not been able completely to free themselves from the discourses of superstition against which they rail. Finally, my analysis of *The Conjuror’s Magazine* revealed the circulation of coexisting (and sometimes conflicting) occult practices during the decade, and demonstrated the political implications of prognostication. I have offered a reading of this fascinating hybrid text as a platform for political debate, encouraged by its editor, Henry Lemoine, in order to provide an education in sceptical reading for his astute readers.

I began my second chapter by investigating the discourses of the Revolution Controversy, revealing how both revolutionaries and reactionaries armed themselves with a discourse that denoted their rivals' proximity to popular magic. For John Thelwall, I have contended that this political anxiety manifested itself dramatically in the adoption of an identity as conjuror during the years he spent at Llyswen. I have argued for a reading of *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (1801) as a volume in which Thelwall's newly assumed persona as conjuror boldly takes centre-stage as a prelude to his public reemergence after the turn of the century.

The occult investments of the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* have provided a central focus throughout the study. Defamiliarising *Lyrical Ballads* through a lens that identifies the continuing influence of popular magic on the lives of individuals throughout the Romantic period has involved excavating the ways in which the volume engages with the practice of, and belief in, popular magic; I have sought to reveal the ways in which the volume is a site of debate and anxiety for a circle of radical sympathisers that includes Thelwall and Robert Southey. I have offered a reading of Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* that recognises his acknowledgement of continued reliance during the 1790s on the services provided by the local cunning man (particularly those operating in and around his local Somerset). Thelwall adopted the identity of conjuror as a mode of personal empowerment at a moment of personal, political and cultural crisis; Wordsworth, I argue, develops in *Lyrical Ballads* a view of popular magic as a vehicle for the empowerment of the socially disenfranchised. I have focused in particular on readings of 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' and 'The Thorn' in order to explore the role of the cunning woman (Wordsworth's occult figures are resolutely gendered) as a figure of potential social

emancipation. Against recent criticism that has sought to evacuate or demystify the magical elements of these poems, my reading takes cognizance of the (perceived) possibility of magic as a socially levelling force and agent of social justice. The final section of the chapter sought to reveal the transatlantic dynamics of Wordsworth's investments in cultures of popular magic by reading 'The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman' in alignment with the three British 'spell' poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. In so doing, I have offered a reading that recognises the ways in which Wordsworth engages – through complex acts of comparison, elision and relocation – with cultures of superstition in linked colonial and domestic contexts.

In Chapter 4, I sought to reveal Coleridge's anxious attitude to superstition as an entrammelling force. In 'The Three Graves', Coleridge performed a similar transatlantic manoeuvre to that deployed by Wordsworth in his spell poems, but focused on systems of fear, guilt and powerlessness that allowed superstitious belief to survive. Such moves ensured that his poetry of the late 1790s could never fit comfortably within the scheme and socio-political agenda of *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge deployed popular magic as a warning against despotic systems of 'mental enslavement'. Further, I have suggested that during these years of political recalibration, Coleridge would also come to associate popular magic, and the dangerously incarcerating systems of superstition on which it relied, with his earlier radical beliefs – a refocusing that would culminate in the recantation in his 1798 quarto of his earlier prophetic pronouncements in 'Ode on the Departing Year'.

Finally, the thesis has offered a reading of Southey's *Poems 1799* that identifies the volume, not as mere emulation (or even plagiarism) of *Lyrical Ballads*, but as an anxious reaction to what Southey considered to be a dangerous misconception on

Wordsworth's part of popular magic as emancipating force. Despite Southey's increasingly conservative sympathies, I contend that *Lyrical Ballads* had stirred a residual radicalism in the poet. For Southey, the Wordsworthian occult practitioner is actually a dangerously *reactionary* figure, whose occult credentials – gained and maintained, as they are, through systems of superstitious belief and fear – work further to entrap their communities (and, ultimately themselves) in outmoded dependence on patriarchal, despotic power. I suggest that Southey's *Poems 1799* constitute a remedial re-writing of Wordsworth's 'spell' poems that reveals the pernicious social and psychological realities that lay beneath what he considered to be distracting literary sensationalism. Chapter 5 also works to identify the range of occult 'modes' at work in Southey's oriental epic, *Thalaba the Destroyer*. Originally intended as a reminder to Coleridge of their shared ideologies, the poem is haunted by a growing sense of political difference in the face of a waning republicanism.

A conclusion should cast a retrospective glance, but it should also suggest ways forward and beyond. The critical intervention of this thesis can also be gauged in terms of its framing of a template for the exploration of the investments of the wider Romantic period's imaginative writing in cultures of popular magic. Material occult practice has been uncovered as crucial to Romantic anxieties about identity, empowerment, language, and political and social responsibility, and the thesis posits the viability of this approach in relation to second-generation Romanticism, too. There are several writers whose work could not be included within the parameters of this particular project whose investments in the Romantic folk belief deserve to be uncovered.

There is also room to expand what might here be termed the archipelagic occult, by broadening the reading of literary economies of popular magic in England

and Wales offered in this thesis to include the contours of Scottish and Irish magical practice. The methodologies I have employed, particularly in readings of Wordsworth and Thelwall, have grounded the imaginative writing of the period within the geographical, as well as temporal, locations that produced them. This 'New Regionalism'¹ (a devolutionary consequence of New Historicist and postcolonial criticism that focuses on geographically localised, intranational readings)² enables the reconstruction of the precise contours of surviving occult cultures in 1790s Britain and Ireland. While I have conducted closely focused research into the occult cultures of Wales and the West Country in particular with reference to the work of Richard Suggett³ and Owen Davies,⁴ extending the scope of this research to include the work of social historians such as Christina Larner⁵ and John D. Seymour⁶ would allow for further nation- and region-specific readings of Romantic magical practice. This would enable a criticism that would be sharply attuned to the ways in which literary works enact national, regional and border identities.

¹ Richard Holmes, 'Foreword' *English Romantic Writers and the West Country*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. xii-xiii, p. xii.

² A number of critics have recently excavated the contours of 'four-nations' Romanticism. See for example, *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1997); *English Romanticism in the Celtic World*, ed. Gerald Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *English Romantic Writers and the West Country*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *Wales and the Romantic Imagination*, ed. Damian Walford Davies and Lynda Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007); and Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The 'Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales 1740–1918' and 'Wales and the French Revolution' projects undertaken by the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth, have also issued a range of publications that cast new light on 'vernacular' Romanticisms.

³ Richard Suggett, *A History of Magic and Witchcraft in Wales* (Gloucestershire: The History Press Ltd, 2008).

⁴ Owen Davies, *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (Wiltshire, 1999).

⁵ Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Edinburgh: J. Donald, 2000).

⁶ Seymour, St. John D., *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1913).

Expanding the scope of this research in future projects would also provide a valuable opportunity to explore the reach of the Romantic investment in popular magic across different genres. While this thesis has concentrated on the poetry emerging out of the 1790s, an exploration of the work of authors such as Walter Scott, William Godwin and James Hogg give us access to the novel's engagement with local and national occult cultures. In what ways might a surviving material occult lie behind the sensationalist gothicisms of Lewis and Radcliffe, for example? And in what ways might Radcliffe's anti-gothic bathos be attuned to that material culture? Recent criticism has seen the exploration of the gothic novel in terms of psychosexual anxiety and political tension, but little work has been done to explore the relationship between the gothic novel and the mundane, material practices of contemporary, living, magical practitioners.

William Godwin's novel *St. Leon* (1799),⁷ the story of a man who discovered the secrets of alchemy and the philosopher's stone, has been read as a narrative of the social and political traumas of the 1790s following the French Revolution.⁸ However, to date, there has been little discussion of the impact that *alchemy* as an occult practice has on the Romantic novel. As articles from *The Conjuror's Magazine* prove, alchemy remained a contested science throughout the 1790s. Or, to put it differently: there is an alternative 'age of wonder' to be explored here. Alchemical debate also permeated political discourse throughout the revolution controversy. As

⁷ William Godwin, *St. Leon*, ed. Pamela Clemit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸ See, for example, Porscha Fermanis, 'William Godwin's History of the Commonwealth and the Psychology of Individual History', *The Review of English Studies*, 61.252 (November 2010), pp. 773–800 and Andrea Charise "'The Tyranny of Age": Godwin's *St. Leon* and the Nineteenth-Century Longevity Narrative', *ELH*, 79.4 (Winter 2012), pp. 905–33.

Andrea Charise suggests (her categories and examples usefully illustrating the fluid imbrication of alchemy and science in the period):

Counterrevolutionary fearmongers negatively associated alchemy with political, religious, and scientific dissent, while *St. Leon* critiques exactly such reactionary discourse by referencing the destruction of Joseph Priestley's chemistry laboratory in the 1796 Birmingham Riots.⁹

William Pitt was frequently figured as an alchemist in caricatures. A drawing produced by Conrad Zeigler in 1795 portrays Pitt-as-alchemist [fig. 8]. Seeking to follow a recipe 'to oppress People in very short time', he is thrown backward by the force of the explosion emanating from his glass chemical retort, labelled 'power and tyranny spirit'. The smoke that billows from the blast represents the 'convention bills' – the acts drawn up in November 1795 to quash seditious meetings. The figure crouching to the right of the retort fans the flames to an extreme heat with bellows labelled 'United Corresponding Society'; he wears a hat inscribed 'Thelwall' and 'The Constitution of England'. This radical print sees Pitt's alchemical power overwhelmed by the activities of the radical corresponding societies with John Thelwall as their principal activist. Similarly, Gillray's *The Dissolution, or the Alchymist producing an Ætherial Representation*, published by Hannah Humphrey in May 1796, shows Pitt surrounded by an array of occult ingredients ('oil of influence', 'ointment of caterpillars', 'extract of British blood') [fig. 9]. Using the crown as a pair of bellows,

⁹ Charise "The Tyranny of Age", p. 915.

and the gold of the 'treasury cole' (an obsolete word for money, but also, interestingly, a term used to describe a conjuring trick) to feed the fire, Pitt dissolves the image of a worn and sleeping parliament to create a new but prostrate assembly, over which he will preside as 'perpetual dictator'. A historicised reading of *St Leon* would usefully locate Godwin's novel in the context of these discourses of alchemy as a conflicted material occult (and inherently political) practice at a mid-decade moment of crisis.

Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering, or the Astrologer* (1815) is another novel that deserves to be reconsidered through the historicised lens of the various occult modalities I have trained on the productions of the 1790s in this thesis. I would suggest that the novel reveals the contemporary influences of astrological practice. Scott's tale is well known. On the birth of Henry, Godfrey Betram's son, a gypsy woman, Meg Merrilies (based on the early-eighteenth-century Scottish gypsy, Jean Gordon, who was a staunch Jacobite supporter, and whose granddaughter Madge was known by Walter Scott) offers to tell the newborn child's fortune. Amit Yahav-Brown has provided a valuable reading of the rural gypsy band in *Guy Mannering* as a dramatization of 'a coming together of an entire community in a critique of possessive individualism by virtue of their grounding'.¹⁰ Meg Merrilies is figured as a victim of a socially marginalising economic and social shift following the purchase of the Ellangowan estate by the conniving attorney Glossin, who planned to segregate the land for his own exclusive use. Glossin casts Meg, together with the rest of the gypsy

¹⁰ Yahav-Brown, 'Gypsies, Nomadism, and the Limits of Realism', p. 1142.

community who had previously relied on the patronage of the Bertram family, from the land, forcing them to find a new settlement. As Yahav-Brown suggests:

Meg's territorial fortunes emphasize that although Scott intends the curbing of possessive individualism, he by no means intends the abolishment of private property. Instead of abolishing private property, Meg's fortunes suggest that landed property ought to be considered the private possession of all those who inhabit it.¹¹

Yahav-Brown attends to political and social readings of the gypsy figure as one who inspires the novel's characters to participate in 'collaborative action' with the nomadic, united gypsy community as a model. However, it is necessary to consider where these readings might lead. In the above quotation, Meg's 'territorial' fortune-telling does not lead to complete emancipation. Rather, it returns the gypsy community back to a position of dependence on a paternalistic state.

The work already accomplished by scholars on the gypsy culture of *Guy Mannering* has focused on the social structures of the vagrant gypsy band and on issues of land ownership, feudal power and national identity. However, the social capital of the gypsy's fortune-telling as a contemporary practice has been neglected. I suggest that the work conducted by Yahav-Brown needs to be expanded by embedding the novel firmly within living, *localised* Scottish cultures of popular magic; this is particularly important considering the historical genetics of Scott's Meg. When

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1139.

Meg offers to read the newborn child's future, the scholarly Guy Mannering conducts a counter-reading, using the stars to draw a horary nativity. As the novel traces the life of Henry Bertram, cultural differences emerge between the rural folk magic of the gypsy fortune teller and the studious astrology of Guy Mannering. As Yahav-Brown argues:

The two characters prophesy similar futures, but their enterprises are distinguished in how they access and use their fore-knowledge. Mannering passively watches stars, then he seals what he sees in a note without informing anyone of its content; later, when his prophecy becomes relevant again, he relies on Meg to expose its details and to facilitate its actualization. In contrast to Mannering, who is more of a spectator, Meg spins the future, chanting as she spins: 'Twist ye, twine ye! Even so / Mingle shades of joy and woe, / Hope and fear, and peace and strife, / In the thread of human life'. Meg commands the future she prophesies, as the imperatives of her chant indicate; she doesn't merely observe it, like Mannering.¹²

As I have suggested, any act of future-telling (even individual nativity casting) was an inherently political act, especially considering the conflicts between personal and public modes of astrological projection. It would be valuable to explore Meg Merrilies's inheritance in dialogue with Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, since both Scott and Wordsworth invest in modalities of popular magic as a social enabler for the

¹² Amit Yahav-Brown, 'Gypsies, Nomadism, and the Limits of Realism', *MLN*, 121.5 (2006), pp. 1124–47, p. 1135.

marginalised. Interesting also here is Yahav-Brown's distinction between passive and performative 'futurings'.

Another necessary next stage in the process of uncovering literary Romanticism's investments in a variety of modalities of occult culture involves extending my method and frame beyond the 1790s and working towards a map of the period leading up to the 1830s. This would again involve attending to social history of various scalar values; it would also mean calibrating the ways in which surviving occult cultures of the revolutionary period developed and underwent transformation through the Regency period and into early Victorianism. In this way, we will be able to create a holistic picture of literary culture's occult inheritances. In an article that I refer to in greater detail in my introductory literature review, Laura Wells Betz suggested that the poetry of John Keats (notably 'The Eve of St Agnes') is imitative of a magical charm, and works to 'overpower' the reader with the sensory 'spell of the poem'.¹³ Percy Shelley's mythological occult (which could instructively be read alongside William Blake's prophetic mythologies) can be regarded as radically imaginative political intervention, while Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* provides a crucial point of focus for an analysis of the blurred boundaries between science, alchemy, religion, education and magic.

While the historical study of material occult practice has traditionally bypassed the Romantic period – and orthodox studies of the Romantic period have failed to satisfactorily engage with mundane cultures of popular magic – I have sought to unveil magic as a platform from which Romantic writers could vocalise their reactions to

¹³ Laura Wells Betz, 'Keats and the Charm of Words: Making Sense of *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (Fall 2008), pp. 299–320.

intense governmental surveillance, the pressures that came with 'secret' knowledge, and the social responsibilities of the poet. By intervening in the disciplines of social and cultural history, this thesis offers a portrait of the survival of occult practice in the Romantic period, its practitioners, and its deployment in the imaginative literature of the 1790s. My readings do not seek to *displace* familiar readings of canonical (and emerging) Romanticism; rather, they hope to participate in broadening our sense of relevant cultural contexts by offering alternative interpretations that are both keyed into the complex relationship between literary work and contemporary modalities of magical practice, and alive to the possibilities of enchantment.

Appendix - Illustrations

Fig. 1.



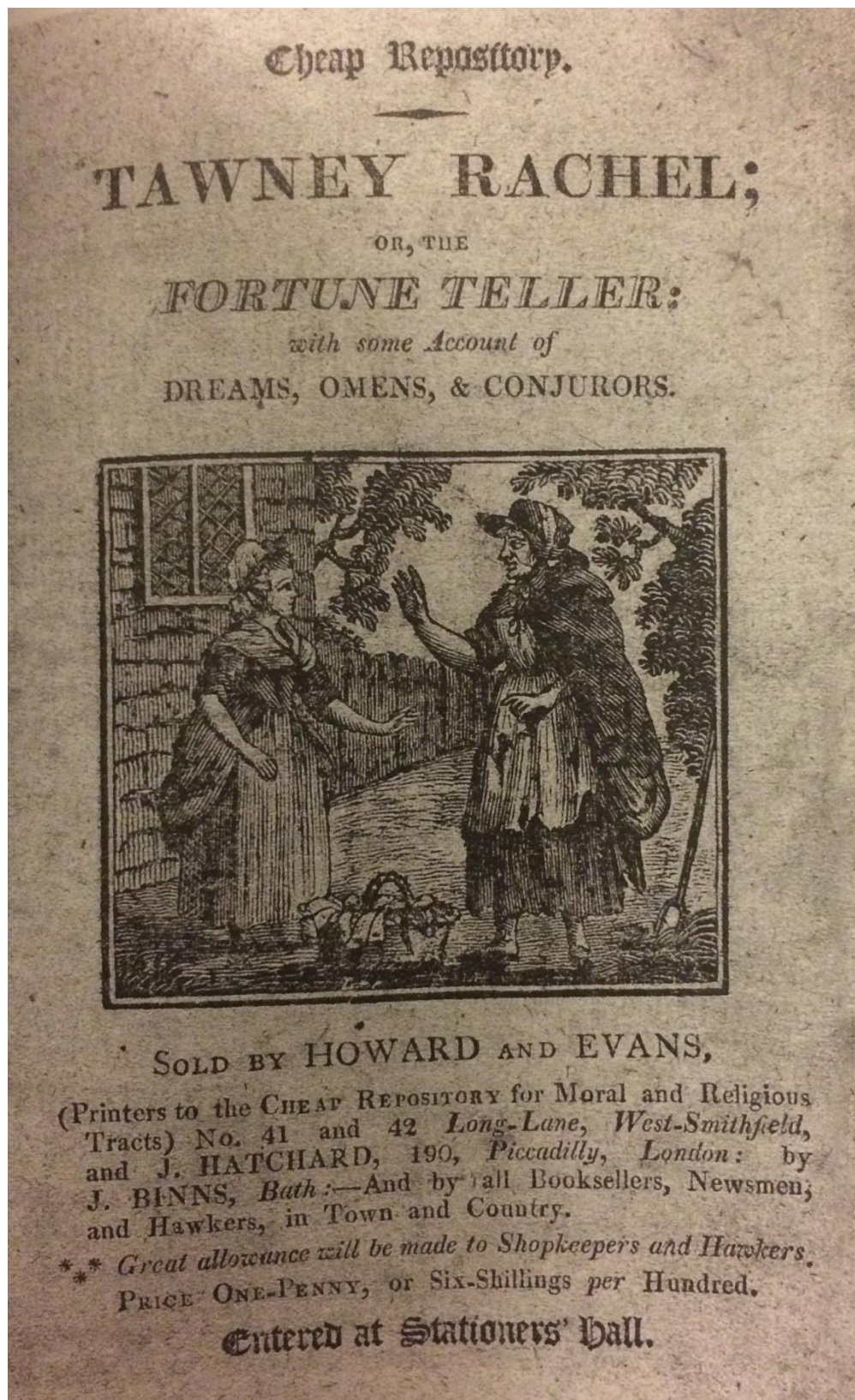
The Conjuror of Ruabon: Being the Life and Mysterious Transactions of John Roberts, known by the name of Mochyn-y-Nant, or the Pig of the Brook, Lately Deceased (Ellesmere: W. Baugh, 1806)

Fig. 2.



The Life and Mysterious Transactions of Richard Morris, better known by the name of Dick Spot, the Conjuror, particularly in Derbyshire and Shropshire, written by an old acquaintance, who was a critical observer of all his actions for near fifty years (London: Ann Lemoine, 1799)

Fig. 3.



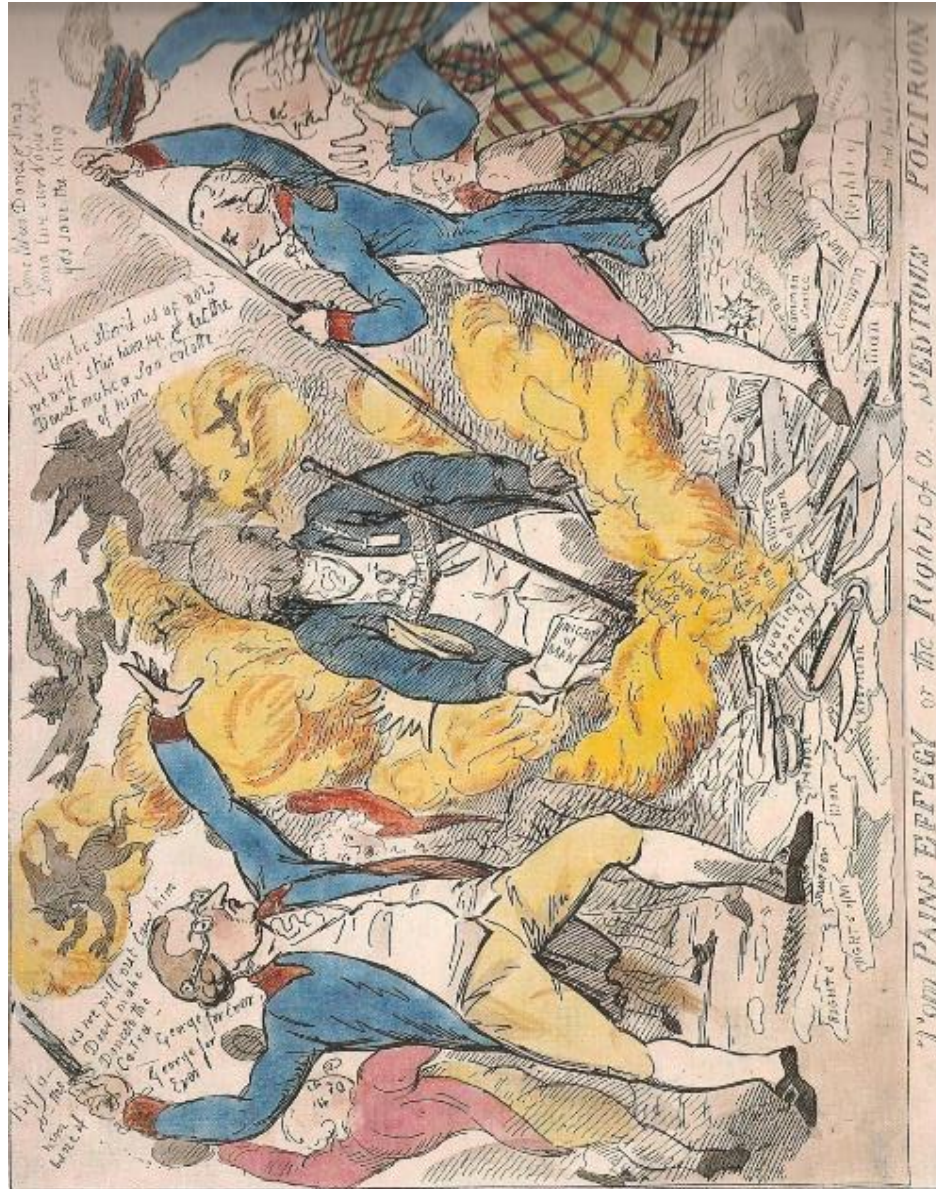
Hannah More, *Tales for the Common People and Other Cheap Repository Tracts* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2002)

Fig. 4.



The Wonderful Life and Remarkable Trial of Mary Bateman (London: T. Broom and W. Evans 1809)

Fig. 5



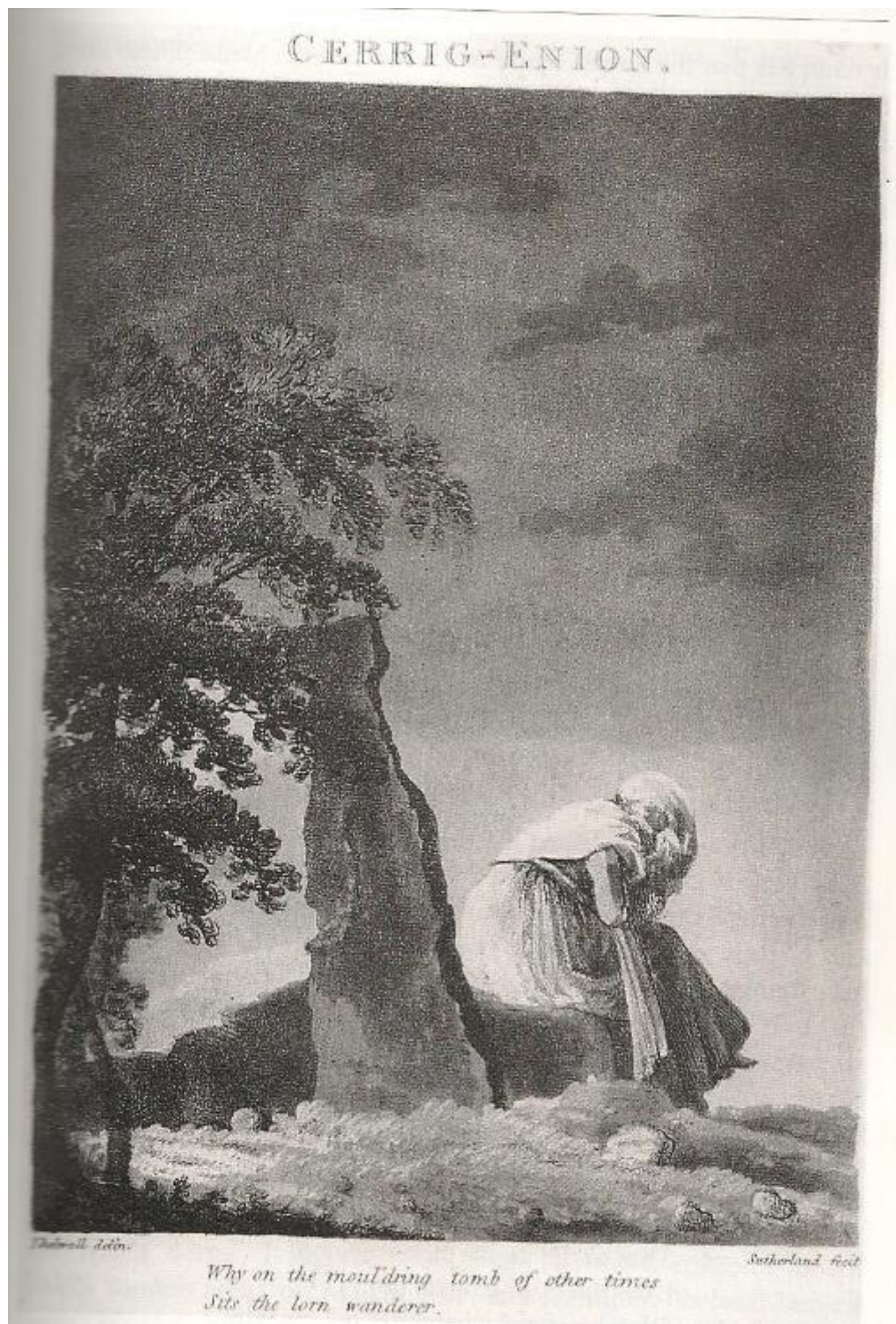
Anon., *Tom Pains Effegy or the Rights of a Sedition Poltroon* (London: J. Aitken, 1793), reproduced in Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 165.

Fig. 6



Thomas Rowlandson, *A Charm for Democracy, Reviewed, Analysed and Destroyed Jun 1st 1799 to the Confusion of its Affiliated Friends* (London: J. Whittle, 1799), reproduced with permission from the British Museum

Fig. 7



Frontispiece to John Thelwall, *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Hereford: W.H. Parker, 1801)

Fig. 8



Conrad Zeigler (1795), reproduced with the permission of the British Museum

The DISSOLUTION, or — The Alchymist producing an Aethereal Representation.

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